

1/ The Stardust & The Star

The alien ship was not alone.

It was accompanied by seven others of its kind.

Its kind: gigantic, obvious at first sight not built by human hand. Nine hundred feet long with a diameter of 150 feet. Huge barrel shape rounded in front, blunted at end. Light shimmering at regular intervals from m its circular windows.

And behind those round windows, giant square-shaped shadows... moving.

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Fifteen light-hours out, the fleet orbited the sun, observing its planets with sensitive instruments. The spacecraft were operated by creatures who had never set foot on Earth. They little resembled human beings.

They called no planet home; their homeland was the universe. They lived in their ships and carried on trade with all the intelligent races of the space realm. They loved peace only when it profited them. Should war hold greater promise of financial gain, they made certain to foment it.

They were both tolerant and authoritarian; they had a great sense of humour but at the same time were characterized by their unrelenting ruthlessness if ever anyone dared thwart them in matters of enterprise.

And exactly this had just occurred!

Inside the control centre of the lead vessel, Commodore Topthor was stomping about in front of the videoscreens. He was truly stomping, for Topthor weighed approximately half a ton. This thousand pound person from another planet was as broad as he was tall-five foot four. His complexion had a definite greenish tinge, his smooth skull was devoid of any hair. The men of his race compensated for their baldness by wearing bushy red beards.

The Galactic Traders were descendants of those Arkonides who owned a huge empire 30,000 light-years from Earth but who had become too weak to rule their stellar domain. As a result the Traders had split off and set up a realm of their own. They established business contacts with all inhabited planets and lived off this trade.

But Topthor was no ordinary Trader; he belonged to the clan called the Mounders. Ages ago when these particular descendants of the ancient Arkonides were still living permanently on a planet, their world had a gravity 2.1 times that of Terra. In the course of many generations this had caused certain anatomical changes which had resulted in the present body shape of the Mounders. They were outsiders to their own race but galactic ethic forbade racial discrimination of any kind. True to their cunning and clever nature, the Traders-or Springers as they were more familiarly known-had made capital out of the bodily changes of their kinfolk: the Mounders became the guard troops of the Springers, pledged to come to the aid of their own race whenever needed and, if necessary, do battle for them.

However, this time, Topthor was acting on his own initiative.

He was staring at the videoscreen in the centre of a whole battery of screens covering one wall. It showed the picture of a blue-green planet with all the signs of a flourishing civilization. Continents were imbedded in blue oceans. White cloud banks overhung the vast stretches of land, hiding what was underneath.

The giant being with the humanoid features nodded and hit a button with his huge hand. At once another videoscreen lit up. The face of a fellow Mounder appeared.

"What do you want, Topthor?"

"Is that where it's supposed to be? Down there on the third planet of this solar system? It's strange we should find out about it so late."

"They call themselves Terranians," the other Mounder remarked. "It's only a few years since they are capable of space travel and already they've managed to stick their nose into our business and establish trade relations with two other solar systems."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Grogham. I've listened to the radio messages of our brethren; the bad news was quite explicit. Orlgans and Etztak sent out quite detailed reports which we intercepted. Though they didn't request our aid, it isn't against our laws to intervene, as long as it won't harm another group of our traders."

The two Mounders were conversing in the usual Intercosmo spoken by all intelligent races of the empire. Grogham stroked the beard that made him look older than he was in reality.

"According to the latest reports, Orlgans and Etztak have their hands full trying to catch a special envoy of the Terranian leader Perry Rhodan. That envoy has entrenched himself on an ice

Planet some 300 light-years distant from these parts. Since we are here in this sector I don't see why we shouldn't meanwhile investigate this planet number three-after all it's the cause of all our latest troubles. Who knows, we might end up with some advantageous business deals ourselves."

Topthor's mood changed abruptly. He said icily: "Bossiness deals for us are out of the question here, Grogham. Not in this case! You don't seem to realize that we have encountered here for the first time some serious competition. In hardly ten years this Rhodan has managed to create an interstellar power. This formerly backward planet now disposes of a mighty fleet. Its ships are attacking us. This is an open declaration of war. And why? We were only attempting to find out what they were up to."

"Not we," corrected Grogham, the pedant, "it was Orlgans. He seized two of Rhodan's ships and tried to pump his men for information. If you call that a friendly gesture..."

"Enough of that!" roared Topthor-and whenever this half ton colossus began to yell even the videoscreens of far distant ships began to shake. No wonder then that Grogham grew scared. After all, he was merely the commander of one of the ships which was part of Topthor's commercial and battle fleet. "Do you really believe I am interested in such piddling details? Do you think I undertook this long trip just to stick my nose in the affairs of other merchant clans, let alone to come to their assistance? If we can turn a nice profit in this affair, that would be a plus factor, but so far neither Orlgans nor Etztak have requested our aid, and they are obliged to pay only in case they have asked for help."

Grogham was dumbfounded. "Then what did we come here for? I've never known you to do something without a compelling reason..."

"That's a keen observation," praised Topthor. "I never do anything for nothing. All along I've followed the reports of our robot spies, which as you might know have been put out of commission meanwhile, as well as the reports of our station on the moon Titan. Rhodan would be no match for Etztak in case he should resort to something he is still hesitant about, namely to request us or some other battle units to join him in his fight against this upstart. Etztak can't make up his mind there because he knows it would cost him a good deal of money. Meanwhile Rhodan is planning to get some superior weapons which would enable him to defeat us, and in particular Etztak. And where do you think Rhodan is hoping to get such weapons?"

Grogham was again at a loss.

"Then let me tell you," bragged a triumphant Topthor. "I do know something about it. People talk about the so-called Planet of Eternal Life with a certain amount of scepticism; there is a rumour that it might exist but nobody actually knows if this legend is based on reality. I am convinced there is a kernel of truth hidden in every legendary tale-therefore this must apply also to this story."

"The Planet of Eternal Life!" mumbled a still incredulous Grogham. "I've heard of it. It's supposed to wander somewhere in the depths of the cosmos along its erratic course but no one has ever found it. just a fairy tale..."

"No fairy tale!" shouted Topthor furiously. "Do you assume in all earnestness Rhodan would chase a phantom now that his survival is at stake? I have reliable information that Rhodan knows where this legendary planet can be found. He knows its co-ordinates. And he is planning to go there in order to obtain new weapons. And if he should succeed that would mean the end of our position of superiority in this galaxy. But if we beat him to it, it will mean a fabulous business deal for us."

"Is Etztak informed of Rhodan's plans?"

"Of course he knows about it. But he is a fool, just like you-he won't believe in the existence of this mysterious planet. It appears far more important to him to capture that little subaltern of Rhodan, Tifflor by name, who is hiding out somewhere on an ice planet. Well, I'm smarter than Etztak."

Grogham did not raise any objections.

"Etztak and his tactics are of no interest to us for the time being," continued Topthor. "We have but one goal to pursue: to keep Rhodan under our surveillance. He is a remarkable fellow. He succeeded in wresting the carefully guarded secrets from the Arkonides. I am highly impressed by this little Terranian. But I must not let myself be carried away by feelings, for after all this same Terranian is bent on shattering our power. And he must be prevented from doing that at all costs. For once order is restored within the Arkonide empire-and this is the goal this Rhodan is striving for-we won't keep our exclusive position as the sole traders in our galaxy, and no more exploitation of newly discovered worlds either, that's certain."

"What do the reports have to say about Rhodan starting his journey?"

"Rhodan? That's just the point-we've no idea. The reports are old-relatively old. They ceased the moment our relay stations, or rather those of Etztak, were put out of commission by

Rhodan's hostile actions. We heard only that Rhodan will attempt to visit the Planet of Eternal Life-and now comes the most important point of that message: He's going to visit it once again. That means he must have been there already once before, so he knows its position."

Grogham's bushy red beard trembled visibly. His eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "He's been there before?" He breathed heavily. "By all the Gods of the entire Universe and all the Markets of the Galaxy..."

"Now you get it!" triumphed Topthor, "That sounds different, doesn't it? So you see we won't be chasing after some will-o'-the-wisp, we will pursue a very real trail. By the way," he abruptly changed the subject, "still no news from the other ships?"

"They are positioned on the other side of the system, 30 light-hours away. So far nothing has been observed of any Terrestrial ships starting. And no transitions have taken place either."

Topthor seemed pleased. "That's important. Rhodan will give himself away if he carries out any transitions. Our space-structure-sensors will register and determine the location of any movement throughout the five-dimensional plane. We'll simply follow after these transitions and if we're lucky we'll rematerialise close by the spot where Perry Rhodan and his ships will return into normal space."

"You figured that out very cleverly," Grogham had to admit. "Let's hope you won't have to wait too long for Rhodan to appear."

"Even if it should take years," snapped Topthor, "it will be worthwhile in any case. The Planet of Eternal Life-how can you compare that with a few lost years...?"

And once more Grogham was at a loss for an answer.

Silently the eight ships continued on their path around the distant sun, waiting for the moment when a Terranian would try to leave his home planet Earth and then his solar system. These eight ships formed a barrier which could not be pierced without alerting their highly sensitive location finder instruments.

Earth meanwhile was unaware that it had become the centre of an intergalactic defence belt.

And this belt had all the time it needed for a long wait.

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Perry Rhodan, however, did not have a lot of time left.

What he had tried to avoid for a decade now, had overtaken him: The most powerful race of the huge Arkonide empire alerted to Earth's existence. Gone was the protective isolation and the blissful anonymity. Of all the living beings in the universe, it had to be the Springers, the galactic traders, who discovered Earth's position!

The first battle had been won. All the robot spies that the Springers had deployed on Earth and within the solar system had been put out of commission. In a surprise attack Rhodan had successfully destroyed the enemy's communication bases on Titan. But the situation was still undecided. Far away in the system of the double star Beta-Albireo, 320 light-years from Earth, stood the two heavy cruisers Terra and Solar System engaged in a fight against the armed commercial fleet of the two Springer commanders Organs and Etztak. And on the second planet of that system, a primeval ice world, Julian Tifflor and his friends were holding out, waiting to be rescued. Among them was Pucky, the feisty little mousebeaver, with his many remarkable talents. They were all waiting, hoping to hold off the Springers and thus divert their attention from Perry Rhodan until he could obtain the necessary weapons with which he could definitely chase away the enemy intruders once and for all.

The general situation was far from rosy at the time when Stardust, a mighty battleship of the empire class with a diameter a half mile, was racing toward the point of transition.

Rhodan was visibly upset about this situation, a fact which was noticed by his friend Reginald Bell with a commensurate degree of uneasiness. "I'd like to know why you should keep on worrying your head off, Perry," he tried to cheer up his long time pal and boss. "Everything's going OK. We needn't be anxious on account of Pucky and Tiff, they'll make it alright. And as far as Nyssen is concerned..."

"Major Nyssen's job isn't exactly easy," Rhodan reminded him in a serious tone. "The two cruisers under his command certainly know their duty but I don't know how long they'll be able to keep up flying mock attack sorties against the Springers. And worse even, how long will it take until this presumably highly intelligent race will come to realize that we are using nothing but delaying actions against them?"

"Why exactly are they called Springers? They look just the way we do, don't they?"

"They own no proper home planet but keep springing from one solar system to the next. They

are also known by the name of Traders but I think Springer suits them best because it emphasizes their rootlessness."

Bell gazed at the videoscreen. The giant planet Jupiter was moving sideways and out of view. Assuming a speed close to that of light, the Stardust was racing to the transition point which was located beyond the orbital path of Jupiter.

"How long will it take?" Bell inquired.

Rhodan scowled. "Reg, you have an inimitable talent for expressing the most complicated problems in simple questions. How long will it take? This is what's so crazy about the whole deal! I'm afraid I'm unable to answer your question at the moment. As you surely remember, when we first spent a short while on the Planet of Eternal Life and then returned to Earth we found out to our great consternation that four and a half years had gone by. This planet, Wanderer, the artificial construction of a super-being, is existing in another time-plane. But we have no choice, we must go there in order to get a new weapon: otherwise we'll never succeed in chasing off the Springers. What might happen if we shouldn't return till one or two years have elapsed, even though we believe we've stayed no longer than a day or two on Wanderer?"

A faint grin flitted across Bell's broad face. The reddish bristles he called his hair made no attempt this time-despite the horrendous prospect-to free themselves in protest from the heavy, stiff layer of pomade, the way they usually did. Contemptuously he waved his big, thick hand.

"And why should that take place? We'll simply ask It to even out the time difference."

Indeed for a moment Rhodan looked quite perplexed. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "It will let us whistle for it, I'm inclined to believe."

It was the unfathomable entity to whom this planet Wanderer belonged. The spiritualization of a most ancient people. It contained billions of brains which voluntarily had renounced their bodies. It could be compared only to an energy-being which had the combined intellectual capacity of all mankind. It-at first an incomprehensible miracle which could only gradually be understood by those who grew aware of the fact that it possessed humour despite its infinite superiority.

"Why should It do such a thing?" protested Bell, who for once remained serious. "Didn't you get along perfectly with It during your first and then later on second visit, even if that lasted but a few minutes? Why shouldn't It do us this favour of excluding the time factor for once?"

Rhodan did not reply. Instead he pushed a button. A small videoscreen lit up. The face of a man became visible, one of the ship's radio technicians.

"Sir?"

"Send an ultra-radio message to Major Nyssen. Location: Beta-Albireo System, 320 light-years. Co-ordinates are known. Text in code..."

Rhodan stopped, pondered for a few seconds before he continued: "Calling cruisers Terra and Solar System. Hold out at all costs, do not endanger ships. The Springers must be kept away from Earth. I'll inform you upon my return from the planet Wanderer. Length of stay unknown. Rhodan."

The technician acknowledged the message with a brief nod. "Via short impulse, sir?"

"Of course. Right away!"

Bell watched the man's face gradually disappear from the screen, changing into coloured spirals which grew darker and dimmer until finally vanishing altogether. "Let's hope nobody will intercept this signal," he mumbled with a worried look.

"So what?" Rhodan reassured him. "It won't hurt at all if Etztak finds out that we keep in contact with our ships. Anyhow, he can't decipher the code."

"I wasn't thinking so much of that, Perry. But what if some of the Springers' ships should be somewhere nearby and could pinpoint our position..."

Rhodan's face grew a shade paler. He knew at once what Bell intended to say with this remark. Certainly if somebody knew their point of transition and placed themselves behind them it would by no means be impossible for them to follow right behind. Using the sensitive location finders and the structure sensors made such a manoeuvre quite feasible. But then Rhodan shook his head.

"We have destroyed all their automatic spying installations in the solar system. There are no more Springer ships here, Reg."

Neither Rhodan nor Bell had the slightest inkling of the existence of the so-called Mounders, let alone that of all things this very same martial race intended to use Rhodan in order to discover through him the Planet of Eternal Life. For the first time in his life Rhodan committed the mistake of underestimating an opponent. Naturally he realized that he was unable to overcome his enemy with the usual conventional means; this race was too wise and too experienced

for that. While carrying on their trading business with virtually every inhabited world in this part of the galaxy, they had not failed to acquire every type of weapon in existence. This was a hurdle that even Perry Rhodan could not surmount—at least not yet.

Added to that was Rhodan's obvious nervous excitement. The uncertainty of what unpleasant trick this time shift might once again play made him restless. Bell's advice—to ask It to neutralize the two different time planes—had merely been a friendly suggestion. Of course it was quite another matter if it would favourably consider their plea.

A soft humming sound interrupted Rhodan's sombre thoughts. A relay switched on and automatically connected the command centre to the radio room, where at this moment Nyssen's confirmation was arriving, an impulse lasting several seconds. After decoding the message the following text was recorded:

"Your message received. Don't worry. We'll take care of the Traders. They won't catch us. Expecting soonest arrival of the Stardust in the Albireo System. We'll hold out till then. Nyssen."

Still, Rhodan did not seem relieved. He thanked the radio centre, then switched on the intercom which let his voice be heard in the farthest corners of the gigantic vessel. He spoke:

"Control centre to crew! We'll reach our transition point beyond Pluto in five hours. Half an hour before the transition the intermittent 60 second warning signal will be sounded."

"Another five hours!" groaned Bell. "Even at the speed of light!"

Rhodan smiled. But this time his smile lacked the usual calm reassurance.

"Light is just too slow, Reg."

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Topthor's bulky boss jerked out of his seat. Grogham was calling. The red, bushy beard of his clansman was trembling with excitement on the videoscreen.

"Topthor, our instruments have located a gigantic spacesphere which is moving out of the system. Its size should be cause for alarm."

"That must be the main ship of that fellow Rhodan's fleet," remarked Topthor, failing to be impressed by the news. "The time has come, Grogham. How did you find it?"

"Radio message. We intercepted it. It was easy to determine the direction of the beam. Beta-Albireo. Impossible to decode, though. Probably some message for their forces stationed there."

"Let Etztak battle it out with them, Grogham. I'm interested only in Rhodan and his destination. Take care to have exact calculations made. We'll follow Rhodan at a safe distance. Make sure to have barriers set up around us so that he can't locate us with his direction finders. The moment the expected transition will take place, ascertain position and force of the space concussion and space rupture. We'll follow behind him with the same intensity and dimensions. If all works out alright, we should emerge from the five-dimensional field again within a distance of not more than one light-year from Rhodan's new position. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear," confirmed Grogham and cut the connection.

Heavily, Topthor fell back into his seat and observed what happened on his videoscreen. At first a tiny sphere became visible, escaping from the solar system at the speed of light. It would pass by the waiting fleet of the Mounders at a distance of about half a light-hour. The direction finder barriers had to be switched on. This way Topthor and his small fleet would become invisible to Rhodan's detection instruments.

The minutes grew into hours. The Stardust glided past the eight cylinder-shaped ships and shot out into interstellar space. Now the transition might take place at any moment.

Topthor ordered his ships to assume a new course. They were following the Stardust at a precisely calculated safe distance, awaiting the all-decisive and all-revealing transition.

It occurred two hours later.

The normal picture screen showed a brief flicker and then the giant spaceship vanished as if it never had been there at all.

The structure sensors registered the space rupture and concussion which travelled through the space-time continuum with speed faster than light. The sensors took precise measurements. The instruments were working with unimaginable techniques. Ten minutes later the results were ready. Grogham announced them proudly:

"Intensity 467.00958 jump-units. Direction unchanged. Distance exactly 1602.18 light years, plus or minus 0.661. Your orders, commander?"

"Transition! Immediately!"

The signals were racing through the eight ships. Relays were clicking. The engines hum

grew to a roar. Calculations had to be rapidly made taking into account the distance that had separated them from the point where the Stardust had gone into transition.

And then...

A flicker where the eight vessels had been standing-and suddenly no trace was left of them.

Topthor's fleet had dared the leap toward an uncertain destination.

The concussion of the eightfold transition was racing through space.

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The instant Rhodan could feel the first pains typical for his returning state of consciousness, he knew the transition had been a success. Nearby, Bell was moaning, inspecting himself all over to make sure all the parts of his body had rematerialised in the right spots. He was eternally worried that some malfunction might occur during the transition and that he would find his nose all crooked or in the wrong place.

"All present and accounted for?" Rhodan inquired. He did not share his friend's secret fears. His worries were of another kind. "Let's hope we'll find Wanderer!"

For that was indeed a big problem. The superbeing's artificial planet was invisible to all optical instruments and could not be located by any direction finders. Unless It should make its presence known or provide some clues as to Its whereabouts they would never find the planet Wanderer-except by sheer accident. And Rhodan didn't wish to have to rely on such an infinitesimal chance.

Wanderer moved in an elliptical course which took 2 million years to complete, rotating around some 30 solar systems, all lying in an almost straight line. Two of these solar systems were at both the focal points of this orbital ellipse. Rhodan had been puzzled by the thought why the Earth's solar system of all things should constitute one of these focal points. At some time in the future, Rhodan had decided, he should investigate the solar system lying at the other focal point. He sensed that there might be some surprise in store for him.

Although he realized the futility of his act, Rhodan started up the direction finder machinery. A quick glance at the screen showed him that the Stardust was now standing in a totally starless part of the galaxy. There was no sun within a radius of 50 light-years. Only in the faraway reaches could he make out innumerable stars, shining quietly and as if waiting. They did not twinkle; they were like the countless eyes of an otherwise invisible monster.

The situation was the same as on that first occasion when Rhodan had first sought the Planet of Eternal Life in order to obtain the biological cell shower which would arrest his aging processes for the next six decades. There had been no indication, no clue, that an artificial planet, the abode of the mysterious It, was travelling in its orbit in their immediate vicinity. It, the unfathomable being whose trail Rhodan had been pursuing on a chase through time and space in order to find the secret of immortality. Well, that secret had still remained a mystery but since Rhodan had been able to solve all the other puzzling tasks set by It, he had been presented the gift of prolonging his life span periodically. His friend Reginald. Bell had been included in this and had thus been rid of the worries of how to prevent his magnificent reddish thatch of bristly hair from turning white.

And on that previous occasion they would never have detected the planet, invisible to their eyes and instruments as it was moving nearby in its orbit, if It had not chosen to announce Its presence in a rather startling manner. Inside one of the halls of the Stardust a monstrosity had suddenly materialized, which they had been able to render harmless only with the greatest effort and with the help of their most sophisticated technical means. The unknown Immortal's reaction to all this had merely been a Homeric laughter as if the whole affair had been one huge joke. It didn't take long for Rhodan, at that time, to understand that, indeed, the whole chase through time and space had been just fun and games for It.

But Rhodan had realized something else, too: It had teleported that monstrosity into the Stardust with the aid of a hyper-matter transmitter. And this was exactly the reason why he now wanted to return to the planet Wanderer. He intended to ask It to put such an HMT at his disposal-perhaps even two of them. There couldn't be any more perfect weapon than that.

"We'll find Wanderer," Rhodan tried to banish Bell's worries. "I only don't know how long it will take us." He remembered how he had communicated with It at that time. Actually it had been a friendly conversation. They had called each other "Old friend." It had a great sense of humour. "Announce the third alarm stage to all men aboard, Reg. After all, it's quite likely It will welcome us with some of It's usual pranks."

"Will do, Perry!" Reg acknowledged his friend's order and left for the communication room

to make all the necessary arrangements. Rhodan was left alone in the spacious command centre. He stood, lost in thoughts, gazing at the picture screen which showed nothing but some far distant stars. Not a trace of Wanderer; the Planet of Eternal Life, where It was dwelling in a state of tremendous boredom because of Its immortality.

"Hello, darling!"

Rhodan was thunderstruck. Among the 500 members of the Stardust crew there were, of course, also a number of girls and women, but he could not recall ever having been on intimate terms with any of them. They all regarded him as their commander, the relentless, hard driving man, even if endowed with a blissful sense of humour, but still the remote, unapproachable commander of the Stardust. And now...

He whirled around and stared into the face of a woman. He must have seen her some time, some place, he thought.

"But, darling, don't you remember me anymore?"

Her voice was silky and caressing at the same time alluring and demanding. Her face could not be called innocent looking but it possessed a certain charm, which even Rhodan could not entirely resist. But he also realized that he was facing here no real human being, only a clever matter-thought-mirage of the Immortal.

"Hello, madam." He decided to play along with the Immortal's prank. "You have come on behalf of my Old Friend, I presume. Please, have a seat."

"But darling, since when do you treat me so formally?"

She stepped closer and placed her slender arms around his neck. Rhodan felt the warmth of her body and was incapable of moving. He stood stock-still, breathing in the fragrant scent of the beautiful woman. She was wearing a dress which seemed to consist mainly of an antique robe.

"Hm, ahem," Rhodan said clumsily. He did not have a great deal of experience with lovely females, particularly not with those who did not exist at all. Still, the presence of this corporeal apparition was just as real as the horrifying monster had once been. Anyhow, Rhodan noticed with pleasure, It had changed its tactics and had passed from monsters to lovely women. Some improvement-or was it?

"Well," said the charming beauty, and smiled, enticingly. "You don't seem to be going to the movies too often, darling."

"Very rarely," admitted Rhodan. Suddenly he knew who had come from the void into his command centre. The Immortal had searched his memory and must have detected the fleeting trace of some long forgotten film which It then had proceeded to materialize. That's why she seemed somehow familiar to him.

"Perry!" she said suddenly and embraced him so ardently that Rhodan couldn't manage to fend her off, although he had firmly intended to do so if the case should arise. "Do you still love me? You liked me a great deal that time, didn't you?"

Blast, she doesn't exist in reality! Rhodan tried to rationalize bitterly, although he knew for sure that she did exist nevertheless. Not the same person, as far as he could judge. Only an imitation, which had been materialized from his own memory banks. However there was still another possibility-and this wasn't the first time that this had happened-It had taken the actual creature from Earth, or better its actual mind. But the person's mind was sufficient to have him or her materialize as a real living creature. It had even transported entire groups of people from Earth's past and had set them down in the time plane of the artificial planet Wanderer where they were behaving as if they were still on their own home planet.

But be it as it may, the body warmth of the beautiful film star whose name still eluded Rhodan, was very real indeed. He tried to resist the strange feeling that threatened to seize him. Mustering all his strength, he attempted to push the woman away.

But he had misjudged his own force. The beautiful creature possessed superhuman strength; she could easily have felled a prize boxer and laid him flat out on his back. Rhodan could not budge her even an inch away from him. On the contrary. Smiling as enchantingly as ever, she drew even closer to him and kissed him full on his lips.

Rhodan could have put up with that perhaps and also forgiven It if Bell had not chosen to return to the command centre at this very moment. He was accompanied by Redkens, a cadet of the Space Academy of the Now Power. During this mission Bell was in charge of the navigation of the Stardust.

Bell's face was truly a sight to behold. He advanced a couple of steps before his brain comprehended what his eyes were seeing. Over there, near the control panels, stood his friend and master, Perry Rhodan, fighting tooth and toenail against being kissed by Cleopatra. Bell, too, had seen that film long ago, but had remembered more about it than Rhodan.

"Good Lord," he groaned, staggering against the nearby wall. "Good Lord, if it isn't

Stella Rallas! I must be losing my mind!"

"Who?" blustered the young cadet, turning beet-red in the face. He was an ardent but hopeless admirer of the well-known film actress. He couldn't believe his eyes to see her here, more than 1,500 light-years away from Hollywood, in the arms of his commander. Rhodan strained to avert his head. The pretty ghost didn't seem to mind at all that they had acquired an audience. Tempestuously, the only too real-seeming apparition bit her resisting lover on his earlobes.

Rhodan cried out, startled by her sudden, ardent attack, and kicked her in the shins. But the world-famous film star didn't appear to be bothered by such uncavalierly behaviour. "Darling, I love you," she breathed fervently.

Bell nearly suffered a stroke of apoplexy. He staggered and could hardly stand on his feet. His eyes widened in horror and surprise; kept staring at the incredible scene in front of him. It didn't occur to him for a single moment that this spectacle might be the first sign of life with which the Immortal announced Its presence. All he could perceive was the beautiful woman in Rhodan's arms.

"Did you smuggle her aboard, Perry?" he gasped helplessly. "You sure could have let me in on that secret a bit sooner, pal!"

"We ought to leave the two alone," suggested Redkens, politely turning to leave when he was stopped by Rhodan's desperate voice. "Don't you dare leave me here with this creature, Cadet Redkens! Help me get rid of this woman-in a hurry!"

"But this is Cleopatra!" corrected Redkens bewildered. "Or rather the fabulous Stella Rallas..."

"I don't care who she is!" raved Rhodan, still trying to free himself from the unyielding embrace of his unwanted amour. "Get a move on, you two! Help me!"

Redkens couldn't make any sense out of Rhodan's orders. Why on Earth had his commanding officer taken along this love goddess if he really didn't like her? He would never have thought his idol capable of such obviously conflicting behaviour. But still...

"Come on, Redkens," moaned Bell and started to move. "I'm completely baffled by all this. Nothing makes any sense any more. She must have gone off her rocker."

But hardly had he touched the beautiful woman's arm than she let go of Rhodan, turned around and peered lovingly into Bell's red face. "Reggie, my darling little Reggie-boy! So we do meet again here after all these years. Come into my arms; let me kiss you, my sweet!"

And now it was Bell's turn to be trapped in a tight spot. The luscious red lips of the formerly so unattainable film star were lovingly pressed against his own lips, thus fulfilling his age-old desire once to be kissed by the beautiful Rallas. He offered no resistance and let the gorgeous Cleopatra have her way with him, paying no heed to the Homeric laughter in his ears. Even Rhodan, glad to be released from the iron grip of the unexpected visitor, had to laugh at the sight of his friend, the normally ice cold, steel hard Reggie, as he was literally melting in the arms of the superstar, Stella.

Only Redkens, the hapless cadet, felt that fate was treating him unkindly in this situation. His head swung to and fro, from Rhodan to the lovingly embracing couple. The poor fellow was at an absolute loss what to think of this whole affair.

Finally the Immortal seemed to realize that this scene had gone far enough. It arranged that Cleopatra should release her victim. Suddenly, Bell was standing there, all alone, his arms embracing someone who was no longer present.

His friend's posture struck Rhodan as being so absurd that he completely forgot his anger and started bellowing with laughter. Bell's eyes, shut tight in ecstasy till this moment, opened slowly. He realized how silly he must look. And that in the presence of Redkens, who was still leaning against the wall, stammering over and over again: "An autograph! How I would have liked to get an autograph from her!"

"Oh, shut up, Redkens! That woman could never have given you an autograph-it was nothing but a ghost, Bell reprimanded the young fellow.

Since Redkens had not been along on the initial trip to the Planet of Eternal Life, he knew nothing of the strange incomprehensible jokes the Immortal was so fond of playing on those who had come in search of It.

"A ghost? But I certainly know Rallas when I see her..."

"It might just as well have been Columbus," interjected Rhodan. "But Columbus wouldn't have scared me as much as that... what was the lady's name?"

"Rallas-the ravishing Rallas!" moaned a very disappointed Redkens. "How could she have been a ghost if she had a real live body?"

"It can accomplish anything It wants to do," Bell enlightened him. He had gradually overcome his shock, once he understood who had fooled him with this illusion. "Out of our

imagination It creates concertized illusions. They are nothing but our materialized thoughts. Rhodan's subconscious mind contained the memory of this one particular film with the film star Rallas-this was enough for the Immortal to form an exact imitation of her and have her materialize right here in our ship. It's quite simple-though I must admit to having been tricked by the apparition for a moment."

"That was quite a lengthy moment" observed Rhodan, "in case you weren't aware of what was going..." Rhodan fell silent in mid-sentence. There was suddenly a voice in his brain-the soundless telepathic voice of It the Immortal.

"Hello, old friend," It said. "You have come to visit me? Oh, I see you have important reasons for this visit. Well, we should have a longer talk about all this. Keep the same course as before, also the same speed. In exactly three minutes you will hit Wanderer's protective screen. Shut off the engines."

Rhodan awaited further instructions but they never came.

He looked at Bell. "Did you just hear a voice?"

"No. Did you?"

Then Rhodan realized that It had spoken to him alone. And as strange as it might seem, this time It appeared to make it a point to speak to Rhodan as soon as possible. The fact that It had given Wanderer's exact position directly to Rhodan seemed to be an indication of It's decision.

"Shut off the engines!" ordered Rhodan. "Bell, alert the crew to be prepared for tremendous sudden deceleration. Despite our gravitational fields we should experience a considerable jolt. In three minutes we'll hit the energy field of Wanderer. This will act as brakes for us. And then..."

Somebody was laughing. It was Redkens. The young cadet was still standing at the same spot as before, leaning against the wall. But now he was holding a postcard size photo in his hand. He kept staring at it, laughing so hard that the tears welled up in his eyes.

Bell walked over to him and took the picture. He examined it for barely a second before he, too, burst out laughing. Then without as much as saying a word he passed the photo on to Rhodan. Rhodan glanced at it and saw an excellent colour print of the lady, who just a few minutes earlier had squashed him so energetically against her breast. The picture bore an inscription in a delicate handwriting: "To my faithful admirer Redkens with best wishes from your friend Stella."

* * * *

The Springers' spaceships had been constructed according to Arkonide principles though most did not resemble each other. All the flagships of each of the clans' fleets had been equipped with structure sensors which registered and announced every concussion occurring in the space-time structure. The sensors had been coupled to a group of instruments that not only could almost pinpoint the exact location but also calculate the distance covered by any object causing such a space rupture.

Thus it was not particularly surprising when Topthor and his fleet returned to normal space hardly five light-hours away from Rhodan's Stardust."

Topthor soon arrived at the same conclusion as Rhodan before him: within a radius of 50 light-years there was not a single larger chunk of matter-apart from the quickly located Stardust, of course.

His face all puckered up in anger, Topthor stared at the video-screen. From another screen close by could be seen the fairly calm-looking mien of Grogham. "So where is your marvellous fairy tale planet, Topthor?"

The leader of the Mounders remained imperturbable despite the anger he felt inside. His eyes remained fixed on the screen; not for a fraction of a second did he dare take his eyes off the Stardust. He didn't want to risk letting that ship out of sight nor lose instrument contact with it.

"Do you really think, Grogham, that we'd find that ship right in front of us? I'm sure there are appropriate precautionary measures, and if I'm not mistaken..."

He fell silent suddenly.

On the main videoscreen where the Stardust could be seen, something strange was taking place.

The Stardust was a gigantic sphere with a diameter of 2,400 feet and now one of its hemispheres began to disappear. The observers were under the impression that over there, just five light-hours away, a lunar eclipse was in progress. All went very fast. One half of the Stardust vanished within the course of two seconds, while the rest took about 10 seconds. Apparently this

vanishing act slowed down toward the end.

Topthor was at a loss how to explain this phenomenon. "Damn it, that wasn't a normal transition," he said somewhat bewildered. "There was no space rupture, no disturbance in the continuum. Something simply-devoured Rhodan's ship."

"Devoured?" stammered Grogham. His face grew pale. "What do you mean by that?"

A full alert signal spread instantly throughout Topthor's craft. The fleet set out on a miniature leap across five light-hours. When the ships rematerialised, they found space all empty around them. Their instruments showed nothing whatsoever within a radius of 50 light-years. Therefore, the Stardust had become non-existent, although this was totally impossible. Matter can be rendered invisible, if need be, but it cannot be made to vanish without a trace. At least not without a normal transition which would undoubtedly have been registered by the instruments.

Where had the Stardust gone?

Topthor found no answer to his question and for the first time he was confronted by an unsolved problem. Actually, even, by an unsolvable problem. Over a distance of more than 1,500 light-years he had been able to pursue Rhodan-and now all of a sudden this Earthling had vanished into an absolute void. There was something fishy going on here!

Grogham spoke up: "Since he disappeared at this spot here, he'll return to the same place. All we need is enough patience to wait till then."

"That's what I thought myself," mumbled Topthor angrily. "Be prepared for a long wait-but we have lots of time."

"May I let the crew have a rest period?" asked Grogham.

Topthor nodded his head in agreement. "Yes. Also pass on the order to the captains of the other ships. A full sleep period for the crew. I don't believe there will be anything happening for a few hours at least."

Topthor was quite wrong in such an assumption. But how could he have had any inkling that his men would not even have the time to fall asleep?

2/ To Distant Barkon!

The Stardust was racing with half the speed of light into the bell-shaped protective energy field of the artificial planet Wanderer. From one second to the next the speedometers fell to zero.

Despite all the activated neutralization fields their entry was accompanied by a sharp jolt throughout the entire ship. Everyone who had not fastened their safety belts was knocked about. Fortunately, Rhodan had foreseen such an eventuality and had ordered the necessary safety precautions so that no one was actually injured.

During the course of 12 seconds the Stardust was penetrating and passing through the artificial sky of Wanderer-and then the planet lay before their eyes.

It was a world of wonder. It contained all that could be found on any of the inhabited planets of the galaxy. Gently undulating landscapes with meandering streams alternated with wide oceans dotted with picturesque island groups. The continents were covered with park-like forests. In between stretched giant steppes which were inhabited by the oddest creatures. Steep mountain ranges created a change in the scenery and introduced an element of welcome diversity. Prehistoric winged dragons soared through the skies with staggered flight patterns.

It was a world close to paradise.

But it was not a normal world. It was a flat world. The planet Wanderer was not a genuine planet but rather a giant disk with a diameter of almost 4000 miles. Above this world arched an energy bell with an artificial atomic sun fixed at its highest point. This sun gave warmth, light and life to this peculiar world.

This world was visible only to one inside this energy dome. Even at the slightest distance it became not only invisible but also non-existent. This world was in another time plane and could not be located even by the most sensitive instruments.

Rhodan pushed a button. The metal plates in front of the window hatches slid aside. When Rhodan arrived at the observation dome of the spacesphere, Bell was already there to greet him. Filled anew by the unfathomable wonders of the Immortal, touched to the depth of their souls, the

two friends stood there silently, admiring the panorama of the idyllic world as it unfolded below.

"Do you like it, Perry?"

The voice of the mysterious Immortal was suddenly clearly audible inside the room. It seemed as if It had talked to them not by telepathy but in a real voice. Rhodan smiled calmly. "It is such a wonderful and peaceful planet, old friend. You have created a paradise for yourself which should be the envy of every mortal being-"

"Not only the mortal ones but the immortal ones envy me for my creation," It giggled in amusement. "You have come to visit me?"

"I have come to ask a favour of you," confessed Rhodan, still gazing down on the fairy tale landscape. "You must know what I want from you."

"I haven't the faintest idea," It lied. "How should I know what your wishes are? I'm not prying into the innermost secrets of my friends."

"You're less than truthful!" protested Bell, who was thinking of the beautiful Rallas who had so abruptly been removed from his arms. "I can prove..."

"Ah, our friend Bell," said the invisible speaker. "You were annoyed by the pretty imitation? Well, we'll give you a treat! I'll smuggle her into your cabin tonight..."

"Don't you dare!" roared Bell, very scared, fearing less the amorous Rallas than the derisive laughter of his crew. His ruddy cheeks had grown conspicuously pale. They turned a chalky white at the sound of It's roaring laughter. It was everywhere and was therefore able to see Bell's frightened face.

"Beautiful women are so much more interesting than Indians or Wild West gunfighters," said the voice in amusement. It was hinting at the mirages which It had used during Rhodan's first visit in order to keep the Earthlings away from their goal. "By the way, Perry, keep on the same course. Land again near the machine city. It has hardly changed and you will easily find again the great hall where I shall be waiting for you. Homunk will guide you."

Rhodan was astonished. "How do you know what I used to call that robot?"

"But my dear friend, Homunk isn't a robot at all. He is a Terranian that I created-you might call it-from surplus matter. I liked him, that's why I let him continue to exist. Meanwhile he has become much cleverer-he's looking forward to your visit."

Well," asked Rhodan, "haven't you any more surprises in store for us? No tests, no riddles to solve?"

"No, why should I? I'll have all the fun I could only want."

The voice grew silent and it was to Rhodan and Bell as if an invisible person had left the room. Some undefinable something seemed to be receding from them. It was withdrawing and left them alone.

Bell drew a deep breath. "It's uncanny. I'll probably never get used to the idea that such a creature really exists. It is a magician-It has created the whole world down there from the void according to It's own designs. It has transported living beings from other planets and from other times. It is almighty."

Rhodan shook his head in a slight reprimand. "No, Reg, It is nothing but a being that has resulted from the amalgamation of an entire race and therefore possesses its entire knowledge. You might say It's powers border that of a God but it has more humour-and don't forget that this humour came about merely because of boredom. All truly immortal ones suffer from boredom."

"I'd never suffer from boredom if I were to live 10,000 years," Bell asserted flatly.

"There will always be new events that will distract you and make you forget that you have too much time at your disposal. There will always be new adventures that will chase away all boredom."

"Mortals will never be able to imagine what the life of a truly immortal creature is like, Reg. I've tried, believe me, even though I haven't become genuinely immortal. My body periodically requires the life-prolonging biological cell shower-and if some day I'm unable to obtain it, the aging process of my body will resume again. Nevertheless I have given it much thought, what it is like not to grow old. At first I was overwhelmed by an indescribable feeling of happiness and thought I'd be rid of all worries forever. But this was just for a short moment. Then I realized how long an eternity lasts. Around me the eternal cycle of birth and death will take place but I shall remain unchanged and untouched by events. Mankind could start considering me to be godlike-and this would be the beginning of eternal solitude."

"But you'd have companions just as immortal as yourself."

"Sure, I'd have these companions. But wouldn't we grow tired of each other's company if we had to see each other forever?"

Bell did not reply. It would have seemed too sentimental at this moment to assure Rhodan that he could put up with his presence for all eternity without growing tired of it. He looked down at the slowly changing panorama of the world as they flew over it. The engines of the

Stardust were humming softly. The blue-golden sky stretched above them, illuminated by the glow of the atomic sun. Once this sun would burn out, the artificial stars of an alien and unknown galaxy would start to shine—a galaxy that might have been the original home of the Immortal. Millions of years ago the ships of It's long since vanished yet still existing race might have crossed the great abyss in order to find a new home in this galaxy. It had never discussed It's past but perhaps some day soon this great secret might be revealed.

Rhodan, too, was silently gazing down at the planet. They were just flying over an ocean whose mirror-like surface was glittering in the sun. Not the slightest wind ruffled the smooth surface of the water. Some islands appeared on the far horizon.

"Which worlds might have served It as a model for this lovely paradise?" wondered Bell out loud. "Occasionally I imagine I find some traces of our own good old Earth."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Reggie," said Rhodan and pointed ahead. "Those islands down there—they remind me of our South Sea islands. And remember, during our first visit. we saw an exact replica of the North American Rocky Mountains."

Suddenly It's voice filled the room again. It must have listened in to their conversation and have understood every single word.

"You are wrong, old friend. These are never imitations—nor was Stella Rallas an imitation in the proper sense of the word. True, her body remained on Terra, your home planet. But her spirit was given here a new body and thus she herself was actually present. The same object can exist thousandfold if it can be transposed into that many different time-planes. Those islands down there, they are indeed islands from Earth. But they do not exist at this moment on Earth; they did so millions of years ago. You will be able to see that with your own eyes if you set foot on them. The vegetation of these islands is not of the present time but that of an age long gone by."

"I see," said Rhodan, "we are dealing here with two different types of mirages. That woman bodily remained on Earth but not those islands."

"That's right; that's the way it is. And I must confess—I was listening in on your conversation from the beginning—your discussion of the psychological problems connected with immortality is very interesting for me. Although I have solved all those problems and am well acquainted with every aspect of boredom I still cannot really get used to it. Sometimes I wish I would die—I'm convinced it will come to that some day. However, that day has not arrived yet."

Rhodan smiled. "You sound almost depressed, old friend. Where's your sense of humour?"

"Humour need not always express itself in the form of laughter. The fact alone that I granted your friend Bell the gift of life prolongation is proof of my boundless sense of humour. Why else would an Immortal permit this funny looking Earthling to survive any longer than nature had intended unless It had a tremendous sense of humour?"

Bell's red hair bristles stood on end and made him resemble a fighting mad porcupine. Rhodan grinned. "How right you are. But you have mortally insulted our good friend Bell here..."

"That's what's so funny about it all," It giggled. "How can one mortally insult a relatively immortal person?"

"I fail to see the joke," replied a sullen Bell. "And that incident with Rallas—what was so funny about that?"

"Sorry," It announced highly pleased, "you'll never know for you lack a true sense of humour."

Bell made a face but kept silent.

Rhodan observed that they were approaching the continent which harboured the huge hall where It resided. Not much longer and the city must appear in view.

"Is it the same as it was before?" asked Rhodan, firmly convinced that the Immortal was constantly keeping his thoughts under surveillance. "Will I find it without any difficulties?"

"What?"

Rhodan was so perplexed that he let a few seconds pass before he answered: "The city—what else?"

"Forgive me," It said in a conciliatory tone. But Rhodan thought he heard a trace of sarcasm in that voice. "I was just watching the death of a solar system—more than 200,000 light-years removed from here. Millions of years ago, this solar system drifted out of its galaxy and the inhabitants of the second planet tried to detach their world from the sun in order to transfer it to another solar system. But their planet turned into a super-nova. Now that system has two suns—but no more inhabitants."

Rhodan and Bell were listening with bated breath. It was speaking with a calm, controlled voice, as if It were telling some made-up story—yet they knew that this was not the case.

"The debacle lasted several months. But I was gliding through the various time-planes and

the whole catastrophe unrolled before me in an explosion of a few seconds duration. Too bad, they made only one tiny mistake. They almost succeeded in their plan."

"What plan?"

"To wrench loose their planet from their own sun's grip. They had already created an artificial sun of their own, were in possession of a special drive which could have safely removed their whole planet... but why waste any more thoughts on the whole affair once it has happened?"

"Can't it be undone?"

There was a silent pause. Then It said: "Why not? It would be fun. Old friend... do you see the mountains ahead of you?" Do you recognize them?"

"It looks like the Alps," said Rhodan.

"It doesn't merely look like them, these actually are the Alps, old friend. Beyond these mountains lies the city you are seeking. But let's not lose any more time-Bell will have to be alone for just a second... but what does one second mean in the life of a mortal being let alone in the eternal life of a quasi-immortal? Rhodan, take a deep breath. It will take many weeks before you can breathe out again."

While Rhodan was looking at the automatic calendar he felt how he was becoming invisible.

He could still bear Bell's horrified voice calling: "Perry! What's the matter? You're becoming transparent and..."

With that Rhodan lost consciousness.

Everything was so different.

The small ship did not need a regular transition to cause the horrendous distance of 200,000 light-years to shrink to nothingness: it was covering the entire distance-actually flying through it at an unimaginable speed.

The ship was small, with an almost tiny-looking command centre, whose arrangement seemed as familiar to Rhodan as if he had never been sitting in any other such cabin. The innumerable controls did not confuse him at all; they seemed to inspire trust. The oval picture screen, reaching halfway around the room, was like a window opening on the universe.

He was alone but he felt that somebody was there with him, someone whom he could not see. Somewhere in this tiny ship was the Immortal...

"I am not here with you," suddenly said the well-known voice, which seemed to emanate from inside him, "now I am you! Do you understand that. I have assumed your form and am existing within you. Together we shall save a solar system, for I know how sorry you felt for that race that was perishing there, somewhere all alone in the universe-or will perish unless we come to its assistance. In two days we shall land on the planet Barkon II-three months before the catastrophe is due to take place."

"How is all this possible?" wondered Rhodan, staring at the confusion of strange stars which began wandering with fantastic speed across the screen. "What am I?"

"You are I and I am you, old friend. Take your choice."

"And the Stardust?"

"Don't worry, you'll find it again-and won't have missed any time at all. But now a task lies ahead of us, a task you have desired yourself."

"Is this one of your games-a game to while away the time, to chase your boredom away?"

"Of course it's another one of my games but this will save a whole people from certain destruction. Playing with fate is the most wonderful game that remains for me."

Rhodan didn't feel inclined to start a discussion about the meaning of life. His sober reasoning power was just beginning to digest the facts without wanting to ask after their origin. Yet there were a few things he absolutely wanted to know.

"This ship-how big is it?"

"How big? Big enough to contain enough space, food and air for you. You need no protective spacesuit. I could also have transported the two of us in a disembodied state to Barkon II but this way it is far more interesting and also better."

"What kind of a drive is it that lets us race through the universe with such incredible speed?"

"Don't let yourself be deceived. The speed only appears to be so fast; in actuality we are flying at the simple speed of light-but I have altered the normal passage of time, a process which can be turned back again in a retrograde direction any time you desire. In our present state, 4000 years pass in every hour; since we are flying with the speed of light we are therefore covering about 200,000 light-years within two of our relative days."

"This is madness!"

"On the contrary, it's completely normal. Once you master time you will also master space."

"But if so much time-out there in space-is passing, that sun of Barkon II will no longer exist when we get there. That's pure logic, isn't it?"

"It would be logical if we hadn't already plunged back 200,000 years in time the second we departed. Even three months more in order to find the right moment."

"It is incredible," said Rhodan, shivering with awe. "If I didn't know you are here with me, I would be afraid, truly afraid."

"Regard the universe," now the voice of the Immortal said inside him. "Perhaps you'll never again see it in this form. We are covering much more than one light-year per second-that is an incredible speed. Even if we were now to hit a planet or a sun we would not notice it. Not only we are moving but also the matter out there-and from our point of view with incomprehensible speed. Besides, the probability of hitting a celestial body would be smaller than hitting a fly in midair with a random pistol shot. Much smaller."

Rhodan did not reply. He followed the Immortal's advice and was absorbing the miracle of cosmic creation as it presented itself to his awestruck eyes. It was like a dream-and maybe everything was nothing but a dream in actuality.

The ship fell into an ocean of stars. The law of perspective caused the impression that the glowing suns were concentrated in that spot to which the little spaceship's nose was pointing. Again and again new suns massed in that same spot, then fled in all directions, accelerating the more they withdrew from the centre. Then they were gliding by on either side with a speed of one light-year per second, only to converge again in one point. This second point was located far behind the ship's rear.

The great distance made the stars seem to slow down, some more than others. But all kept their original colour. The well-known rainbow effect did not materialize.

The Immortal remained silent. Perhaps It was lingering somewhere else now, roaming through the universe in It's own way. For a moment Rhodan felt very lonely and lost. He was thinking of the Stardust and its mission. He was thinking of his friend Bell from whose eyes he must have vanished so suddenly. He thought of Julian Tiffleur, who had to hold out on a far away world together with Pucky and some companions until Rhodan would bring them the promised help. All trusted him and relied on him-he who was now sweeping through the cosmos on board this marvellous, incomprehensible ship in order to warn an unknown race that might not even exist any longer.

He shook his head. "My good old friend has some mighty strange ideas," he murmured and glanced at the clock in front of him at the control board. The clock showed Earth time. They had been travelling now for three hours and had covered almost 13,000 light-years.

"This idea was yours, Rhodan," said the Immortal, who after all had not taken off from the small vessel. "I was describing to you the annihilation of a race-you brought up the idea of saving that race. I only want to prove to you that, under certain circumstances, it is possible to influence the future. True, it's just a game, but it has also a very serious side to it. For some time later you will once more encounter this race we'll be saving soon. Perhaps you will regret having warned and saved them!"

The hours crept by slowly. Rhodan had fallen asleep after he had eaten a meal. When he awakened, the scene before him had changed.

The point ahead of the ship's nose no longer showed myriads of stars. Only a few could be seen there and the number passing by, to disappear behind it in eternal darkness, kept diminishing all the time.

Darkness...?

Rhodan became aware that there was no absolute darkness behind them. The round picture screen did not permit a view of 360°, only a section of about 70°. The rear was lying in a dead angle. And yet, what he came to realize now was sufficient to cause cold shivers down his spine.

He was staring at the Milky Way, as it was slowly taking shape.

In less than 12 hours he had traversed the marginal regions of his home galaxy and was now already outside its starry reaches. The Immortal's little ship had dared the jump into the abyss, that ghastly abyss of millions of light-years that gaped between the galaxies and could never be gapped by any mortal race.

Or could it be done after all...?

In breathless amazement he gazed at the scene that opened up before his eyes. He could clearly make out now the shape of a spiral nebula as seen 'from above.' One of the luminous arms was hiding Rhodan's home sun lying in the far distance over 50,000 light-years. At its point of insertion the same spiral-shaped arm cradled the star empire of the Arkonides-and that of the Springers. And yet, this spiral nebula was but a tiny portion of the entire galaxy.

Suddenly it dawned on Rhodan how minuscule indeed was the Arkonide Empire when measured against the extent of the Milky Way. And what was Terra compared to that empire? A mere speck of

dust!

Could it be that the Immortal had taken him along on this trip to demonstrate how microscopically small Rhodan was in comparison to cosmic creation?

Rapidly the structure of the spiral nebula shrank in size. It fell back behind them at a million times the speed of light. At least that's what it looked like to Rhodan's wonder-filled eyes.

Rhodan peered ahead again. But there was no star to be seen there. The space ahead of the ship was so black as Rhodan had never before perceived. It was absolute darkness in which light seemed to be an unknown factor. Only over to one side, to the left, shone a tiny, washed-out spot. He had to keep his eyes fastened to this spot for almost 10 seconds just to be able to see it properly. Another galaxy, many millions of light-years distant!

Over to the right he could barely make out another such galaxy. It was a faint glimmer in the darkness—a tiny spot which represented the glow of many millions of suns, now hardly visible, like the weak light of a dying candle. Even the light of the stars loses the battle against space and time, thought Rhodan, drained of emotion, and closed his eyes.

When he woke up again, eight hours had gone by.

The universe still looked the same as before he had gone to sleep. Twelve to 15 galaxies were shining from all directions. They had not come any closer despite the fact that Rhodan was rushing toward them with a speed of billions of miles per second. And that had been going on for the past eight hours.

"Listen," he whispered with emotion. "Your joke is going too far. You should have spared me the sight of infinity."

"Why?" The voice of the invisible Immortal harboured a hint of surprise. "Why shouldn't you see what is lying ahead of you? We all are existing in infinity and are part of it. Why shouldn't we know what we are?"

"It's too much for me. My mind refuses to..."

"In that case your mind has grasped the truth," interrupted the voice. Then the centre of their topic shifted. "Now, do you understand why the Barkonides wanted to remove their planet from their own solar system? Can you see that the total isolation of their home, tucked away in this corner of the universe, had to drive them almost insane? Whenever they look up into the night skies they see only far away galaxies which have to represent—in their eyes—the symbol of friendship and gregarious company. They believe that there in the distance are inhabited worlds so close together that they are constantly in touch with each other. While they, the Barkonides, are all alone, utterly and infinitely alone."

A wave of recognition suddenly swept over Rhodan. "The Barkonides!" he stammered. "What if you leave off the B..."

"No speculations, please!" the Immortal warned with, Rhodan imagined, a hint of a knowing wink. "Coincidences are a fertile ground for speculations but they still remain coincidences. Only in rare cases can we state any true connections."

"Not this time?"

"Do you really expect me to answer? Why don't you ask the Barkonides in person—there will be ample opportunity for you."

Rhodan refrained from posing any more questions.

* * * *

They were still 15 minutes short of the time their trip through infinity would have lasted two full days. For the past hour Rhodan had tried very hard to discover a star imbedded in the total darkness that lay between the washed-out spots of the galaxies.

"In another 60 seconds Barkon will appear on this video screen, old friend. The star's light can be seen only some 800 light-years away."

Silently, Rhodan continued to stare at the screen. And then, exactly 60 seconds later a tiny star arose at the vanishing point. Rapidly the tiny glimmer grew brighter and larger.

"That's Barkon, the lonely sun. Of course it's easy to understand that the inhabitants of such an isolated system are unacquainted with the galactic code of behaviour. Though they have learned from traditions handed down through the ages that they are not the only form of intelligent life in the universe, they still believe they are the superior race. Their technology is outstanding but they have neglected the art of space travel as it seems senseless to make any efforts in that direction. Even if they'd fly with the speed of light they'd need 150,000 years to reach the nearest star. That would be too wearisome even for Immortals. And the Barkonides definitely are not immortal. For this reason they have concentrated their entire knowledge and

effort on the one project: to change their planet into a gigantic spaceship. This is their only hope, they believe, to return together in the course of thousands of generations to their former lost galaxy."

"A brilliant plan," admitted Rhodan. "But how will I be able to help these magnificent technicians? And who will they think I am when they see me?"

"You will be able to assist them for I am inside you, Perry. And don't worry how, they will welcome you. There isn't another people in the entire universe so much longing for visitors from outer space as the Barkonides. They will welcome you with open arms. Maybe they'll get curious about the propulsion system of your spacecraft but we'll manage to divert their attention when that question arises. Even if they could overcome space and time with their spaceships, it would be impossible for them to transport their whole planet across the distance of thousands of light-years. No, there is but one possibility left-and they have found out about it."

Another five minutes went by.

The sun Barkon had become radiantly bright. It was now shining at a distance of 500 light-years. In nine minutes they would come to the end of their journey.

"How will we brake our speed in time?" said Rhodan apprehensively.

"The synchronous slowing-down passage of time will neutralize all side effects," reported the Immortal and laughed. For the first time in many hours It was laughing again. "You needn't do anything, old friend-I'll take care of everything; I'll do it for you. I'm happy to be a human being once again-what a rare pleasure."

This time good-natured sarcasm was noticeable in It's voice but Rhodan ignored it. Suddenly he moved his right arm without having issued such an order to his muscles. His right hand fiddled with some control knobs. A band on a dial in front of him began to whirl around like mad. Little lamps were blinking off and on. A shrill bell was ringing somewhere in the ship. The floor underneath Rhodan's feet was vibrating.

"Your eyes will register nothing but a diminishing of our flight speed," announced the Immortal gaily. "Keep your eyes on Barkon, that's all. This is our only point of reference now."

The range indicator showed another 150,000 light years. If they kept their current velocity it would mean 160 seconds fill Barkon.

Everything remained as before for another minute.

Then the braking procedure It had announced earlier began. Despite the fact that Barkon kept coming closer and closer, it took a good half hour before the ship dipped into the system at a speed of 600 miles per second.

"They won't notice us until we are there, of course," prophesied the Immortal. "They have neither telescopes nor radar scopes. They haven't seen a star in a million years."

Rhodan was thinking of something else. "According to Earth time-what would the date be now?"

The answer came without hesitation.

"Hm... I was sick then. I know for sure. I was not hospitalized but I was confined to my bed at home in Terrania. Kind of a flu. Hm, and now it's the same date again?"

"Not again... it's still that date!" emphasized the Immortal ironically. "Yes, you are ill and you are on Earth. Have you forgotten your horrible feverish dream?"

"Feverish dream?" Rhodan shuddered. Yes, he remembered it now. He had awakened, drenched in sweat, and had seen the worried faces of his friends Dr. Haggard and Reginald Bell. "But I can't recall what it was that I dreamed."

"I could tell you: you were dreaming that what we are experiencing now-of course very much speeded up and therefore confusing your mind. While you were dreaming you were already forgetting everything. What are dreams in your opinion?"

Rhodan perceived now far ahead the shape of the planet. Soon he could distinguish the outlines of the continents rising from the oceans. Cloud banks bid part of the planet's surface.

"What are dreams?" he asked eagerly.

"Trips of the unconscious mind, that's all. The brain's ability to remember and the spirit's detachment from the body. While we are sleeping our brain is no longer tied to matter and thus is free from the chains of time and space. Human beings know only one form of time travel: dreaming. Dreams are however just a tiny portion of the borderland between reality and vague memories."

"Do you mean to say by that that one actually experiences whatever one is dreaming? I can't believe that."

"Isn't this here proof enough for you?"

Rhodan did not say anything. He had to admit his failure. He could not quite comprehend what the Immortal had been trying to explain. Rhodan however was aware of the fact that dreams

constituted a not yet entirely solved phenomenon which kept raising many questions! But the Immortal's words had opened up new perspectives which seemed so horrendous that Rhodan didn't dare ponder any further. In his dreams, that was incontestable, man acquired abilities he did not possess during his waking hours. He could conquer gravity, could rise into the skies at will, could read other men's thoughts and if necessary could even make himself invisible or teleport matter. Why could he perform all these acts when there was no reason to assume that he might have that potential hidden inside himself?

Had he ever possessed these gifts in the far, far distant past?

"We are about to land," the Immortal's voice interrupted his speculations. "The Barkonides are a nation firmly welded together in the sense of a true galactic civilization. They have one capital city and only one central government which, because of their gigantic project consists mainly of scientists. This will save us a lot of work."

"Do I... do we have to be afraid of any hostile acts?"

"I've already told you that they will regard us as a gift from heaven. Never in your life will you have been welcomed with such fervour and hospitality, although this sounds paradoxical. After all, we are dealing here with a race that never had any contact with other races-at least not for the last million years. They have one thing, however, which no other people in the universe could boast of: an uninterrupted history with authentic data and evidences. In their archives films are kept which were made at a time when on Terra the appearance of the first man was still a far-off dream of the future."

"Films-older than mankind?"

"For these films alone it would be a pity if that race were to perish."

The little ship descended into the planet's atmosphere and circled around this world with several mach. Extensive cities alternated with large agricultural zones and small oceans. Glittering communication lines between the cities spoke of lively cross country traffic.

"The number of inhabitants is small as compared to the huge area of their planet. This is an additional reason why they've neglected the development of space travel. They know only too well that the other four planets of their solar system are totally uninhabitable. And where else should they go to? Their world has been offering them everything they ever needed for their existence."

"And still, you said, they want to leave this world?"

For the last time they entered the planet's shadow and flew over its night side. Barkon was the same size as Terra and had a similar atmosphere. Its gravitational pull was slightly less however.

"Look at this sky, Perry Rhodan, then you will understand why they want to leave."

And Perry Rhodan gazed at the sky.

Since the atmosphere swallowed up the last faint light rays coming from the far away Milky Ways and the spiral nebulae, it had now become totally black. There was no moon to bestow a gentle light. Not a single star was stood in the pitch black firmament of the heavens. No night on Earth would ever get that dark, not even if the sky was totally obscured by cloud banks. He felt as if an opaque, black cloth had been draped over the entire globe, threatening to smother it with its darkness.

Rhodan quailed at the sight. "I think I'm beginning to understand," he said softly.

Abruptly they plunged again into the light of the sun which was rapidly rising from the ocean in the East. The main continent became visible on the horizon. A huge city appeared on the ocean shore.

"They are already expecting us," announced the Immortal. "Naturally they have invented airplanes to fly inside their atmosphere. Nevertheless they know we aren't coming from their own planet. We are strangers and on this world a stranger can come only from space."

"What do they look like?"

"The same as us. Humanoid, like all races of common origin."

Rhodan wanted to ask a question but his hands automatically worked at the controls, without any conscious effort on his part. The small spaceship descended farther and was gliding just a few feet above the gently waving surface of the ocean in the direction of the shore. High above, whole groups of fast drop-shaped airplanes were circling in the air. Ships with colourful little flags left the harbour and formed a parade outside the breakwaters. The landing field close to the city, and directly at the ocean, was ringed by a black crowd of people.

"You mustn't wonder about anything you see here," admonished the Immortal. "In their eyes we'll be like a long lost son returning home. Once upon a time they were in contact with other races but they lost it when the distance to the galaxy became greater. And they did not want to leave their home." There was a tiny pause before the Immortal concluded It's remarks: "Only a few

of them left home. And the Barkonides have been waiting for their return all these million years..."

Thoughts were tumbling all about in Rhodan's brain but there was no time left to put them in order. The landing field came closer and closer and he continued to throttle the ship's speed. As gently as a feather he set down the small spacecraft. The drive shut itself off automatically. The vibrations and the humming sounds died down.

"Let's get off," suggested the Immortal. Then It laughed again but it was an expectant and silent laughter that communicated itself directly and exclusively to Rhodan's brain. "Don't ever forget that I am with you but always remember that nobody else is aware of that. If you wish to talk to me, you must do it from now on without audible words. Is that clear, old friend?"

Of course, I understand you, my much older friend, thought Rhodan in amusement, although he was feeling far from happy and gay.

Yes, that's the way, thought back the Immortal. And now get the hatch open. The Barkonides speak Intercosmo-they even were originally the creators of this simplified language but this fact has long been forgotten.

The whole story behind these strange people gradually seemed to make more sense. Rhodan could somehow guess at how all these clues and little hints might explain it all but it was not the time to start thinking about it now. He got up and walked over to the small airlock, which he no longer needed now. The heavy outside hatch swung open. Warm, fresh air streamed into his lungs. It was good and aromatic air smelling of land and ocean.

Meanwhile the Barkonides had broken through the barriers and came running toward the ship from all directions. With much difficulty an elegant-looking four wheeled motor vehicle managed to make its way through the throng. There was not a trace of either police or military forces.

The vehicle was a convertible. Several very dignified appearing men were sitting inside. They did not seem any different from any welcoming committee on Earth. Each of them wore slightly different clothing, which excluded at once the thought that they might be wearing any uniforms. The trousers were rather tight; their jackets fairly big and loose. One of the gentlemen was even wearing some kind of a top hat.

Rhodan reminded himself of the Immortal's advice not to be surprised at anything.

He returned the welcoming gesture of the oldest of the Barkonides in the car which now had come to a halt. The crowd was disciplined and they stayed far enough behind to permit the four men (obviously some high-ranking officials) to get out of their car.

Just keep calm, recommended the Immortal. They are wondering why you'd be coming at this particular moment. Just when they are finally ready to start on their long journey across the void, they receive visitors from the long vanished universe.

Rhodan did not reply. He leaped down onto the ground of the alien planet and was grateful for its lighter gravity. With a few long strides he reached the four men who were waiting for him.

"Welcome to Barkon, the world of loneliness," said the old man with the top hat. "How did you succeed in finding us?"

Rhodan had to admit that this was indeed a quite peculiar reception considering that these men had never before faced any stranger from out of space. I'll speak through you, indicated the Immortal, who had noticed a slight hesitation in Rhodan. Don't be surprised if you are going to say something you actually don't know at all. You will be kind enough not only to lend me your ear but also your own body.

"It was by accident," said Rhodan. The words that were no longer his own came smoothly over his lips. "The galactic government sent me in search of you. My mission is successful. I've found Barkon."

"We've been waiting for this for one million years," replied the man in the top hat and smiled. Rhodan felt like in a dream-and in a sort of a way this was a dream indeed, in a figurative sense. "But the more our distance to the galaxy increased, the more our hopes of ever making contact with it decreased. Now the miracle has come to pass."

"The miracle is founded in the mastery of time and space," declared Rhodan without comprehending his own words. "Only this little spaceship here is capable of bridging the mighty abyss between Barkon and our worlds."

One of the men, who had a magnificent red beard, stepped forward. "I am Regoon, chief physicist of Barkon and also its Vice-President. I'd like to hear your report about the principles of your space drive and how it was possible..."

"Our guest will have plenty of opportunity to enlighten us about many things we'd like to learn from him," interrupted the top-hatted Barkonide in a reproachful tone, then turned to Rhodan: "Regoon is very impatient, stranger. Forgive his inopportune question. By the way-my name is Laar, chief of government of Barkon and atomic specialist."

"My name is Rhodan," said Rhodan. Now the Immortal had appropriated not only his body but also his name. "I'll remain on your world exactly 10 weeks. This will give us ample time to exchange our experiences in all the various fields of knowledge, science and history of the galaxy."

Laar threw a glance toward the ship which revealed only too plainly his painfully repressed impatience. "We could put it in one of our hangars here so that it..."

"Not necessary," said Rhodan nonchalantly. "Its best hangar is out in space." He made a sweeping motion with his hand. The hatch closed of its own accord. Inside the ship the engines began to hum and the slender torpedo-shaped body rose slowly upwards, then accelerated rapidly, soon to be recognizable only as a tiny, silvery spot in the blue sky. "I've sent it into orbit around Barkon. It will land again in this spot in 10 weeks."

Silently the four dignitaries had watched the spectacle. From the awestruck crowd came a few isolated shouts expressing amazement. Laar swallowed hard a few times before he could finally open his mouth. "Remote control-fantastic. Yes, your ship will be safe up there-although it would also have been in a secure place in our hangar."

"Pardon me, I did not sent it up into space for reasons of safety. While the ship is orbiting your world, it also serves as a hyper-radio station satellite. The moment an important hyperspace message is received the ship will come in for a landing to automatically pass on the information. This is how I can keep up communication with the galactic government."

Regoon had overcome his disappointment. He pointed to the two other Barkonides who now also had climbed out of the car. "This is Gorat, our astronomer. Unfortunately he can study this certainly most interesting science only in a theoretical fashion for there are no sufficiently large telescopes on Barkon to make a closer examination of the nearest galaxy. It's just too far from us."

Gorat was a surprisingly short and fat man. He smiled timidly. "I would be so happy if you could tell me about the stars-it's a wishful dream of mine once to be able to see a real star-besides Barkon, of course."

"And this gentlemen is Nex," said Regoon pointing to a very tall and slender Barkonide. "He teaches the science of Nexialism."

Rhodan, who was quite familiar with that science, noted this statement with satisfaction: that even on this loneliest world of the universe the thought had triumphed that all-embracing knowledge is to be preferred to mere specialization.

Rhodan exchanged greetings with the two men. Then Laar said: "We had ample time to prepare ourselves for welcoming you. You will be my guest, Rhodan. You will have occasion to talk with the outstanding scientists of our world and to convince yourself that despite our isolation we have always endeavoured not to lose contact with our past. Please, come."

Laar glanced a last time up into the sky but nothing was to be seen any more of the mysterious ship that had brought the long awaited visitor.

Rhodan climbed into the car and sat between Laar and Regoon. He was pondering the thought of what might happen to him if the ship should fail to return in 10 weeks as promised. But he could just as well have worried about his fate in case the Immortal should decide now to disappear for good. Then Rhodan would be sitting on an infinitely distant world, the most incredible Crusoe that ever existed.

You are worrying needlessly, the voice inside him suddenly remarked with a hint of reproach. I'll never break my word to you, I've promised you would not lose any time-at most just as much as it takes to take a breath, Concentrate on your mission here. And believe me, you are confronted with a real task!

Rhodan felt relieved when he heard the Immortal's reassuring message. There was no doubting It's word.

Thank you, he thought.

The drive to the president's residence resembled a triumphant procession. The Barkonides were lining the magnificent streets, shouting jubilant greetings to the visitor from space.

The journey lasted almost one hour as it proceeded across the city. Then for another half an hour they drove on a main road leading out of the city again, all the time accompanied by a police escort. Their path led through beautiful park land and woods. Finally they arrived before a huge gate which was opened to let them through on a driveway that ended at the residence of the chief of the government.

Rhodan admired the Barkonides' sense of beauty. The house was not very high; it resembled in style a gigantically enlarged bungalow. The front wall consisted mainly of a glasslike material. It was transparent and permitted a view of the rooms beyond.

"You'll like it here," said Laar pointing to the building. "This is the administrative and

scientific centre of Barkon. Don't be misled by its apparent small size. A remote-controlled television station connects us with all the important places in our world. In your room you will have the opportunity to get acquainted with Barkon and its history throughout several hundred thousand years. Nothing much has changed during that time and you might even consider us to be a sterile society. But we have worked toward one single goal and have neglected many other things."

I know," said Rhodan and paid no attention to the astonished faces of the four men.

Ten minutes later the door of his room closed behind him. He was alone in the room which was going to be his home for the next 10 weeks. A bit forlorn, he sank back into an armchair which stood close to the glass wall. From there he had a sweeping view of the whole city and the nearby ocean. He sighed.

Ten weeks! Why should I spend 10 weeks on this alien world when I can't spare a single minute from all the pressing affairs I should tend to? Isn't that a sheer waste of time?

"We can converse aloud here," countered the Immortal. "Then you won't feel so lonely. Nobody can hear us here and there are no secret microphones anywhere. Waste of time? That's what you think? You are mistaken, old friend. Just remember that you are sick in bed. Your encounter with the galactic traders still lies ahead in the future, more than 10 weeks. So what could you be missing then?"

"I don't know an answer to that. But won't you finally reveal to me what I have to do in order to save Barkon from being annihilated?"

"Don't worry about that either. I'll take care of everything for you. It'll be just some slight manipulation you'll have to do. One day before we leave they'll show us their installations with which they plan to propel Barkon II through space. That's when we'll do it. Kind of a reversal of poles, you might call it."

"That's all there is to it?"

"Yes, that's all!"

"Then why do we have to stay here 10 weeks?"

The Immortal sounded highly amused. "In order to get you acquainted with the history of our galaxy. You can't watch it any faster than the passage of time. And you'll have to watch quite a number of films, I'm afraid."

"Couldn't this be done via hypno-schooling with a time accelerator?"

"Not this time, Perry." The Immortal spoke with a slight reprimand in his voice. "You are as good as immortal but you haven't yet learned the meaning of patience. I believe this won't come until boredom begins to set in. But knowing the way you are you won't have even enough patience to sit still and be bored."

Rhodan looked out of the window. Dusk was falling over the beautiful landscape. Suddenly he felt very forlorn and forsaken.

3/ The Great Archives

The first two weeks passed quickly. With the aid of the television scanner Rhodan acquainted himself with his temporary planet home Barkon. It was accomplished by direct transmission from all parts of this peaceful, unspoiled world. But every evening Rhodan was freshly impressed by the mere sight of the nocturnal darkened sky. Of course no television was needed for that. Only once during these two weeks had the air been clear enough to permit him to see a faint glimmer exactly at the zenith. It had the shape of a frayed spot. This was his own galaxy, 150,000 light-years away. And since he himself was now in relatively present time, the Milky Way he saw was also 150,000 years old. He looked into the past with his naked eyes.

At the beginning of the third week he received a visit from Nex the Nexialist.

"I have been entrusted with the task of showing you the history of Barkon. For this we'll have to go to the Great Archives."

It's getting interesting now, said the Immortal in an inaudible voice to Rhodan. Get ready for some surprises. Don't ever forget that this race already existed when the Milky Way was still young and without life.

A car brought them into the city. Nobody paid any attention to them. Barkon had returned

to the normal activities of its everyday existence. All of a sudden Rhodan realized what made Barkon seem so much like Earth. Its day also lasted 24 hours.

They turned into a side street. There was a sudden steep descent: the road led directly underground. The tunnel was brightly lit but it seemed to be endless. The car drove down this tunnel for a full 10 minutes before it stopped.

"We are now exactly 600 feet below the surface," explained Nex. "This is an absolutely safe storage place for our films. No cosmic radiation can reach down here. Air is permitted to enter when the films are shown and that takes place only once every 50 years when a new government has been formed and its representatives are required to view the history of our world. Otherwise these films are stored in a vacuum."

Rhodan said nothing. Silently he followed the Barkonide through long corridors and various rooms until they reached a fairly large and comfortably furnished room. A gigantic switchboard took up one of the walls. In the front, above some kind of a stage, hung a milky shimmering screen. On the opposite wall Rhodan could see the built-in projector. Two rows of upholstered chairs beckoned invitingly.

"Please, have a seat, Rhodan. Everything will be done automatically; I just have to press the correct button to have the desired film brought to the projector. Our race knew space travel already one million years ago but this knowledge could not save us from the catastrophe. On the contrary. The forcible separation from our home environment in the universe was made even more difficult for us with the realization that a few fortunate ones managed to flee in time. I'm going to show you now Barkon at the start of this catastrophe-which at the same time is the end of its galactic history."

The room grew dark. In front, where Rhodan earlier had noticed the milky projection screen, the wall seemed to recede in order to give way to a reality which presented itself in real-life colours to Rhodan's eyes.

"That's Barkon seen from a departing spaceship," explained Nex with a slight tremor in his voice. "As you see-nothing much has changed since then-except that we had, spaceships at that time. Now you can clearly recognize our former neighbour planet three; it's entering the picture from the side. Unfortunately we could never find another planet suitable for habitation in our own solar system. But we had a colonial empire, a very big colonial empire."

"In which part of the galaxy was the sun Barkon located?" Rhodan asked on an impulse, without having been prompted by the Immortal.

"You'll soon be able to recognize it. It's of course impossible in the short time at our disposal to view all the films we have but I'll select the most important ones. Every 50 years, when our government changes and the newly elected representatives witness the complete showing of these films, they stay three months down here apart from brief interruptions. But then they are informed of the history of our world and the past of our galaxy, of whose present story we know nothing at all."

His statement contained also a form of request.

"Well discuss this," promised Rhodan. "However I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"Your marvellous ship makes me suspect just the opposite," Nex smiled encouragingly. "But look here now-that's one of our last ships carrying settlers. It brings the emigrants to a newly discovered system where life has not yet developed."

The gigantic structure was about 11/2 miles long and was circling Barkon in an orbit. Smaller ships ascended from the planet's surface to bring the passengers. Giant plastic hoses served as safe gangways. Huge cargo hatches admitted smaller vessels carrying the luggage and equipment of the colonists. Far below the planet Barkon was turning beneath the busy agglomeration of the spaceships.

"The settler ship brought along the film again," continued Nex. "You are seeing only short sections."

Soon afterwards the Barkon system sank away in the infinity of space. The film had been made with a quick motion process. This caused Rhodan to re-experience something similar to what he had witnessed on his flight to Barkon II: the stars were gliding swiftly past in the area before him. A yellow sun grew larger. It seemed to be the destination of the expedition. Then a planet filled the view, a medium-sized world, overgrown with a luxurious vegetation. Rocky, high plateaus reared up from grasslands and primeval forests. Broad rivers streamed through fertile lowlands through which vast herds of strange-looking animals roamed. Once Rhodan thought he saw a creature, resembling a dinosaur but he could have been mistaken.

"There was no intelligent life yet on this world," explained Nex. "But this planet was fertile and teeming with all kinds of animal life. Our settlers found a paradise. From the time they landed to the development of a civilization, about 10,000 years must have passed, according

to the experiences we've gathered in other places."

"Do you simply deposit your emigrants on a suitable world and then no longer keep in touch with them?" Rhodan asked in surprise.

A peculiar smile played around the Barkonide's lips. "Yes, that's the way it is. At the very beginning of our history we started colonies that remained dependant on the mother world. But that proved later to be the wrong method. The settlers kept relying on their old home planet and its supply lines. They developed no proper interest to exploit the opportunities offered by the natural environment of their new colony. The settlers became decadent, lazy. On the other hand, our shipwrecked volunteers-for this later type of colonists had to take apart their spaceship in order to be able to survive-they found a new home which supplied them everything needed for life. They were forced to work and to seek further development of their resources. True, they also suffered reverse strokes of fate, and more than once we found out that our descendants on these colonized planets had reverted to barbarism. But these were the exceptions. As a rule vital societies would develop who guarded the inheritance of their forefathers-even if they'd forget their origin. For this was one of our principles: we would not provide the emigrants with any written records or films of our history. Only thus was it possible to make them become completely independent."

"But then they forgot where they came from?"

"Yes. This was the only successful method of settling the planets of the galaxy and of forming races independent of each other. Often it took several thousand or even 20, 30 or 40,000 years till two such races would meet up again. They might wonder why they resembled each other so closely but explained it away as one of the necessities of evolution." Again Nex smiled and threw a sideways glance at Rhodan. "Well, are you beginning to guess at the truth?"

Slowly Rhodan nodded his head. "I believe I do. But one million years is a long time, don't you think?"

"It's not that long, measured by galactic standards, and if we ignore the brevity of our individual lives. 100 thousand years in the existence of a galaxy are, in the terms of a planet, just one life span. Thus this period of one million years that we are all alone in this corner of the universe is the equivalent of 10 galactic generations. I ask you now, what can 10 generations accomplish on a planet?"

"Sometimes nothing, sometimes a great deal-it all depends on the state of development and the characteristics of that race."

"I can see your criticism," said Nex while he was fiddling with the controls at the switchboard. "You believe that during these 10 generations which were 100,000 generations for us, we have been standing still. You regard our civilization as a petrified structure. You wonder why we made no attempt to undertake something against the cruelty of our loneliness. just admit it."

"I feel you should at least have tried to keep up the communication you already had established with the other worlds. Maybe via hyper-radio."

Nex pushed a button. "I'm going to show you today something that will make you understand our actions-if you have a heart."

Again darkness enveloped the room. In front of Rhodan arose a confusion of strange constellations, all unfamiliar to him. The camera seemed to hover in space even though the picture was a bit hazy as if a glass pane had been placed between the observer and the stars.

"These pictures were made by our largest observatory-one million years ago. Once a year our camera made one single shot, always at the same time. In those years when the sky was covered by clouds at this particular date, no pictures were taken. Thus we obtained on an average one picture every three years. It always shows the same section of the galaxy-at least for the time being. Every second you are watching that screen now actually 50 years are going by. One entire life span will take just two seconds here, that is 100 years for every couple of seconds. See for yourself what our own forefathers must have felt then so long ago. They underwent an experience that shook them-to the very depths of their souls. That has remained to this day the basis of our beliefs and mentality."

And Rhodan saw.

The constellations gradually began to shift-to get farther and farther away. They appeared to draw closer into a clump; the stars of the constellations were no longer spaced far apart. They also grew dimmer.

Then the angle of vision became so wide that Rhodan could survey the entire field-and he suddenly recognized what he was seeing.

It was the arm of the spiral nebula from which he had come.

After about 10 minutes the arm had become visible in its entirety. It had become almost impossible to distinguish the individual stars from each other. They formed an elongated and

slightly curved cloud which was shining from inside. But this glow grew rapidly fainter.

"Can you see over there the somewhat brighter conglomeration of stars?" Nex asked, bending down to Rhodan. "That's where once upon a time our sun Barkon was located. For some inexplicable reason this solar system detached itself from the gravitational pull of the rotating Milky Way and slipped away from the close grouping of the stars. However our solar system did not spin off in the direction of the galaxy's rotation but at a right angle from it. To this day we have been unable to agree why this happened. Our system was rushing with an irresistible force into the horrible abyss which separates the galaxies. Nothing could stop this drift. But you can see here for yourself the same horrible sight our forefathers were observing. What they were feeling-I don't know if you can vicariously share their emotions."

Rhodan remained silent.

One hour later the entire Milky Way had become visible. The spiral-shaped arm which also harboured Rhodan's home sun, now shining on an uninhabited virginal Earth, jutted far out into the eternal darkness of the cosmic abyss. Near to its end stood the sun only 30,000 light-years separated from this darkness.

Where was Arkon located? flashed suddenly through Rhodan's mind, but he was careful not to voice out loud this question. But the Immortal had heard the silent inquiry. It answered:

More toward the centre of the galaxy, Perry. Don't indulge in idle guess work now, I've been warning you all along. The right time has not yet come for you to be permitted to get a glimpse of the overall picture. You are beginning to get some inkling already and thus you already know more than any other beings of your galaxy. What you are experiencing now in the form of a vision is a miniaturized version of what another person will experience in billions of years on a far greater scale. Don't keep thinking about this unless you want to go out of your mind.

Farther and farther away receded the shrinking Milky Way into the dark infinity and farther and farther moved Barkon on its relentless path. There were no stars in the vicinity of the spiral nebula. The faint glow of the bunched together billions of stars extinguished the still weaker light of other far distant galaxies. There was seemingly only this one galaxy in the universe and this galaxy kept speeding in the opposite direction with every second-or with every century.

The great solitude had begun for the Barkonides.

Nex depressed another button. "I'll let this film run with 100 times greater speed. From now on each second you are watching here will represent 5000 years on the screen."

The rest of the film lasted another three minutes.

In these three minutes the Milky Way fell with incredible speed into a black hole which knew no limits. From second to second the galaxy was shrinking in size and light intensity. There was still no star to be seen and the sky was dark. The typical shape of the spiral nebula changed into a washed-out spot which gradually vanished into infinity.

Finally the picture on the screen grew constant. "This is our sky as seen today by our camera-telescope which continues making one photograph once a year and sometimes every two to three years," said Nex choked with emotion. He cleared his throat. "We are all alone," he continued. "But we realize that our work eons ago has not been in vain. The planets we colonized have brought forth their own races who by now must have developed fantastic civilizations. We, the Barkonides, are their progenitors. And whatever place you have come from, Rhodan, you have to resign yourself to the fact that you are a descendant of our own colonists-or perhaps a descendant of those men that our colonists deposited on some fertile but thus far uninhabited world. However great your race might be, they owe their existence to us, the patriarchs of the galaxy."

Rhodan was trying to shake off the strong emotion that was threatening to overwhelm him. He knew that a gigantic problem had found its solution but he did not dare to completely take the consequences. It would be too monstrous. But why, he asked himself, had the Immortal shown him all this? Why had he taken him along to Barkon, whose inhabitants had-measured by human standards-looked into infinity but had not learned to cope with it?

He found no answer to his question and the Immortal apparently was not willing to supply it to him for he remained silent.

The image on the projection screen ceased. The room lit up. Nex was standing close to Rhodan. His eyes were filled with that sadness which had become part of life on Barkon II. With a trembling voice he said: "Can you understand now what loneliness means? You live under a starry sky and know that you are not alone in the universe around you. You know that at any time you can get in touch with others who resemble you and are your friends."

"Maybe you are overestimating your descendants who have remained in the galaxy," Rhodan objected cautiously. "Many of your colonists might have needed many thousands of years to rediscover spaceflight. And many, on the other hand, never managed to rediscover it and thus

remained on their own world, separated and isolated from the other races that had been their brothers. Many might have perished without even the faintest notion that they were not the only intelligent race in the universe."

"You are developing a gloomy theory which none of us here would like to believe. We continue living sustained by the hope that our forefathers' colonization work has not been in vain. Your arrival on our planet was proof alone to us that we did not lead futile lives."

"But even I cannot bring back Barkon into the community of the stars," Rhodan reminded him.

A shadow flitted across the Barkonide's face. "True, you can't do that, but you are bringing us tidings from those worlds that once belonged to our realm and to which we had carried the seeds of life, intelligent life. And you shall bring back to them the news of our existence. Merely the knowledge that we have not been forgotten chases away part of the loneliness which has become such an unbearable burden to us."

Rhodan nodded his head. "I think I'm starting to comprehend-and I also believe that I'll be able to help you."

Nex pointed to the door. "Let's go now. From now on I'll have the films projected directly in your room. Today I wanted to show you these underground facilities. In a few weeks when you shall have learned all about our past you will show us what happened meantime in the rest of the galaxy."

"Show you?" Rhodan exclaimed perplexed. "How could I show it to you? I haven't brought along any documents or films."

"Oh, there's no need for that," smiled Nex. "All you needed to bring with you is your knowledge and your memories. We'll change your thoughts to concrete images."

There was no more discussion while they were driving back to Laar's residence. Rhodan tried in vain to find a way out of this unpleasant situation. What could he do in order to avoid the brainwash session that threatened him, for this was exactly what they planned to do to him.

Don't worry, the Immortal whispered secretly to him. Or can you imagine I would have overlooked such an eventuality? Well, then! The Barkonides will be amazed to learn with what results their pioneering work has been blessed.

Will you conjure up for their benefit things that don't actually exist?-Rhodan.

I'll simply show them the future, was Its reply.

4/ Barkon Embarks

Until the eighth week of his stay, Rhodan acquainted himself with the history of the Barkonides-and thus with that of the Galaxy. He learned that the Barkonides believed themselves to be the creators of galactic civilization from which a cruel fate had banned them. They had brought the seeds of life to uninhabited worlds and firmly counted on the fact that their descendants would complete the work they had started for them. They considered themselves the progenitors of all humanoid races.

At a time when Rhodan had been embroiled in a bitter battle with the robot spies of the galactic traders, as he vaguely remembered-a car came to take him to town. He was conducted to a tall building where he was awaited by the members of the Barkonide government, amongst them also Laar, Regoon, Nex and Gorat. They were assembled in a large hall which contained an array of complicated machinery and gigantic control panels. Underneath a luminous cupola stood a lone armchair. They led Rhodan to this chair.

"We'll make matters very simple for you," explained Nex, after a brief initial welcoming ceremony. "We'll save you the bother of giving us a detailed description of development inside the galaxy; it would take too much time. Look at that projection screen over there! Our scientists have worked out a procedure to project your thoughts directly in the form of pictures on it. Just start thinking, imagine what has happened-and we shall be able to experience it together with you. This way we shall finally find out what has happened in our former galactic world since we lost contact with it."

Rhodan sat down in the armchair. While Nex was busy placing a silvery helmet on his head,

making the necessary adjustments and hooking it up properly, Rhodan inquired wordlessly of his invisible companion:

What next, old friend? They'll learn that their work has failed. What became of their endeavours to spread the humanoid race over all the inhabitable planets? What really has happened since they had to live in isolation?

It answered: A lot has happened, a great deal. But not what the Barkonides expected to happen. The contact between the worlds was lost if ever it really existed. Their dreamed-of realm was shattered before it could properly develop.

So what shall I be thinking of now? (Rhodan) I know nothing of the events that took place in the cosmos. Certainly the Arkonides have passed on their knowledge to me but what is that in comparison with what was actually going on?

Not too much, came the Immortal's answer. But leave everything to me now-I'll do the thinking for you. And open your eyes and watch what-maybe-will happen some day. It's going to be only a cursory survey but it will provide these unfortunate people with the feeling they haven't led a completely futile existence in this cosmic desert.

"Are you ready?" asked Nex, interrupting Rhodan's thoughts.

"Yes, of course. What am I supposed to do?"

"Just think of your own history and report what happened till this day."

Rhodan nodded his head and noticed that the lights had been turned off in the hall. The semi-circle of the projection screen began to fluoresce. Then the screen grew completely dark for a moment. Now a three-dimensional planet appeared-Terra.

A gigantic spaceship was orbiting around the Earth. Then the craft descended to the surface on a shaft of flaming rays. It landed. People began to emerge, then proceeded to seize possession of the young, still uninhabited world. The first settlements appeared.

Rhodan thought he was dreaming. The Immortal conjured up things for him and for the Barkonides that could never have taken place. The Terranians? Descendants of the lost race of the ancient Barkonides?

Another view of the Earth, this time as seen from a space station. The polar caps were shifting and wandered down as far as the temperate zones. Then the mighty glaciers receded again. The planet's surface changed its appearance. Gigantic cities arose, cities unlike any that existed on Earth. Giant domes were erected on the moon, making life there possible for the human race. Spaceships were rushing from planet to planet, transporting settlers to Mars and Venus. Out of the depth of interstellar space came the trading vessels of other races, landing on Earth to offer their goods for barter.

Then Rhodan realized that the Immortal was describing the story of some potential future which the Barkonides believed to have occurred already in the past. He reported nothing of the terrible wars which had slaughtered countless citizens of one planet, the third from the sun Sol; he said nothing of the Arkonide empire, that was facing decay and final ruin; he showed nothing of the apparently insurmountable conflicts which made deadly enemies of formerly closely related races.

The Immortal was lying to the Barkonides lest he make their horrible loneliness still more difficult to bear.

After a final overview which demonstrated how all the humanoid intelligent races of the Milky Way were welded together in one great community, the thought-image faded suddenly away. Slowly and reluctantly the lights came on again in the room.

Cautiously, Rhodan peered around in the hall. He saw the smiling faces of the contented Barkonides who seemed to have forgotten their cruel lot. After all, hadn't it been they who had made such a wonderful development possible? They had started their mission and their descendants had carried on and completed it.

Nex stepped over to Rhodan to remove the silver helmet. His voice sounded shaky. "Thanks for this report. We are all thanking you, Rhodan. Now it will be easier for us to start out on that long dark voyage."

Rhodan rose from the chair. He looked at the faces of the assembled men. "A long, dark voyage? I don't understand..."

"Tomorrow we'll reveal our secret to you," said Nex with a knowing smile. "And once you'll have understood the theoretical part we shall show you how far we have progressed toward its realization."

There was a short friendly get-together and two hours later Rhodan was back again in his room.

As he was lying in his bed, gazing out of his windows to watch how the lightless, dark night spread its shadows over the world, he spoke softly: "You have lied to them, old friend. You

have provided them with an illusion which will give them the strength to carry out their insane undertaking."

"Yes," replied the Immortal. "That's what I have done. For some day in the future, perhaps in another million years, the race of the Barkonides will save the galaxy from annihilation they and their experiences with the limitless loneliness of the abyss which threatens between the spiral nebulae. For some day the intelligent races of the Milky Way will feel isolated too, namely at that moment when they face the realization that they'll never be able to bridge this abyss."

"Rhodan did not answer. Though his brain had been rendered super-perceptive through the Arkonide hypno-training, it still had its limitations.

And he knew that he had already exceeded these limits.

* * * *

For days, Rhodan had been instructed re the plan of the Barkonides. Nex had explained the technical details in person and assured Rhodan repeatedly that his people had been familiarized with this plan for many generations and that the best brains of a united world had done their utmost to eliminate any possible source of mistakes.

The interior of the planet Barkon had been hollowed out. The entire population would find accommodation inside to live, to procreate and to develop further for many generations to come. Fantastically complex transportation systems guaranteed easy communication between the different residential centres. Atomic reactors had been placed everywhere to provide the proper lighting, heat and energy. Air-conditioning systems would forever renew the air in order to substitute for the lost atmosphere. And while the icy planet, all deserted and lifeless on the surface, would wander on its lonely path through the universe, life would continue in its interior.

Giant laboratories would produce all the needed food and necessities of life. The manner of existence otherwise would not be different from what it used to be on the planet's surface. And if night should fall, the typically dark Barkonide night, it would be done just to reproduce the same environmental conditions the population had known before.

The most important however was power drive.

The most sophisticated, advanced machinery would insure that the planet could free itself from the gravitational field of the sun Barkon and then pursue its course with constantly rising acceleration toward the distant Milky Way. Some day, Nex claimed confidently, the 'spaceship Barkon II' would race through the universe with the speed of light.

All the while Rhodan could not get rid of the feeling of living in a dream. Whenever he directed inquiries to the Immortal concerning this matter, there was no answer forthcoming; It remained silent and ignored Rhodan's questions.

And this day Nex wanted to show his guest this most unique power drive installation.

They drove to the airport where a small flying machine was already waiting for them. The craft was shaped like a teardrop and was wingless. Rhodan was convinced that it was possible to penetrate space with it without any difficulty but what sense would that make? Even at the speed of light it would take 150,000 years to reach the nearest star.

The flight lasted one hour. They landed on a low rocky plateau which rose from the fertile plain. Several cupola-shaped buildings and high towers indicated that some people were living in this deserted place. Upon closer inspection Rhodan noticed that a huge amount of soil and rubble had been dumped on this plateau to enlarge it.

"Here is the entrance to the power drive installations, which some day will go into effect from this place." Nex pointed toward the ground. "Regoon has carried out the plans which have been handed down to us by tradition and has finally brought them to completion. We'll meet him down below."

Down below-that meant some 15,000 feet below the surface.

Rhodan was filled with amazement and admiration at the sight of the installations the Barkonides had built in the course of several centuries. Endless corridors led into the interior of the planet, lighted at regular intervals by concealed ceiling fixtures. Narrow-gauge rails served the subterranean transportation system. The air was filled with a constant hum and vibration.

Regoon came toward them to welcome his friend and guest. Regoon was clad in a tightly fitting combination which did not binder him while he was working. "You might regard all this with scepticism. But, believe me, we'll make it. Many generations have contributed to this enterprise and well finally bring it to fruition."

"This is only the beginning," smiled Rhodan. "Only your and my descendants will know some day whether you succeeded. How long will it take for Barkon II to return to the galaxy?"

"We have calculated that our journey will last 200,000 years," replied Regoon. "Gorat is very certain about this point."

Two hundred thousand years! Rhodan was deeply stirred by the spirit of sacrifice of this wonderful people. They were willing to withdraw into the interior of their planet in order to make it possible for their future generations to lead a life within the great galactic community. His fellow men on Earth were way behind! They often didn't even think as far as their own children.

"You'll make it," he said, fully convinced that a far-off future would prove him to be right. "Some day our children will be able to shake hands."

The control section of the planetary power drive installation turned out to be an aggregate of machinery of unimaginable complexity. The profusion of switchboards, control panels, generators, measuring devices, gauges, control screens and outside control stations was so overwhelming that Rhodan soon gave up trying to figure out their various functions. Even his well-trained mind could not immediately comprehend what was going on down here in the depth of the planet.

Silently he walked between Nex and Regoon as they passed through the giant halls; he listened to the explanations of the two scientists. They showed him everything; they were proud of their life's work which was intended to make an entire world independent of the sun for 200,000 thousand years.

Provided he, Rhodan, could prevent the catastrophe with the aid of the Immortal!

I've located the spot where they made their mistake, soundlessly came the voice of It in Rhodan's brain. We are about to pass by the main reactor. Don't ask for any explanations, old friend. As I've already told you it's nothing but a faulty connection which would accelerate the fission process to infinity. In that case as much energy will be released within one second as is supposed to last for an eternity. Just start talking animatedly now with your two friends and don't be surprised at what your hand will be doing.

"You see. Rhodan, from this point here we can control the power drive by regulating the atomic fission," said Regoon. "It will be Laar's task within a short while to stand here at this spot to initiate our departure. The preparations for our long journey are completed and we are about to leave this desolate part of the universe."

"The power drive is all set, ready to go?" asked Rhodan pointing toward the installation with his left hand. Nex and Regoon followed Rhodan's moving hand with their eyes. "Are you sure that everything will function properly?"

"Absolutely sure," replied Nex and smiled. Neither he nor Regoon noticed as Rhodan detached two cables, swiftly changing them around. "We have checked everything a thousand times. All is in perfect order."

"I hope so," said Rhodan while he tightened the clamps. He became aware that the Immortal was withdrawing from him. He felt somehow very lost and lonely but this lasted only a brief moment, then the soundless voice started up again.

Success! I've just been in the future. The Barkonides are beginning their journey. They do not perish in the fiery glow of their own planet.

How is it possible to change the future? (Rhodan) Haven't you also seen how their planet became a sun?

Perhaps you'll understand that later on. Immortality and boredom solve all problems.

"Now let's throw a glance at the isolation chamber where the energy is produced," said Nex pointing to the floor where a round manhole cover 15 feet across could be seen. "It's too dangerous to go down there."

He pushed a button and the lid, more than 6 feet thick, swung slowly upwards. Rhodan stepped to the rim of the opening and peered down into the abyss that gaped before his eyes.

The shaft expanded farther down and ended in another hall where mighty metal casings could be seen. Rhodan could not distinguish any details; the distance was too great. A monotonous hum rose from below and filled the air with intense vibrations. A smell of ozone became quite pronounced.

The lid closed tight again, flush with the floor. "Tomorrow we're starting with our evacuation procedures all over Barkon," Regoon said proudly. "It won't be long now until we'll depart."

"And tomorrow I, too, will have to leave you, my friends," replied Rhodan. "I'll report to the galactic worlds that the ancestors of mankind will be returning."

Nex and Regoon smiled. Their eyes were no longer filled with their customary sadness. Optimism and quiet happiness had replaced them-and the strength and resolution to endure the rest of their lives in absolute solitude.

* * * *

The drive to the airport resembled a triumphal procession. Thousands of Barkonides lined the streets and jubilantly bade farewell to the ambassador from the galaxy. Rhodan could see no sign that all these people would see their sun for the last time this day. But even before he would have left this solar system the Barkonides would descend into the depths of their world--there to spend the rest of their days. Only their descendants in a far distant future would some day see again a new sun which would give warmth, light and life to their planet.

While the car slowed down and then finally came to a complete standstill, there descended from the blue sky the little ship which had originally brought Rhodan to this planet. It landed gently. The hatch swung open by itself.

Laar was the first to get out of the car. He held out a hand to help Rhodan out. Nex, Regoon and Gorat followed.

"Let us thank you for your visit, Rhodan. Now we know that our children haven't forgotten us. Rhodan, bring our greetings to the galactic community from its brothers."

"I promise I will," said Rhodan.

As he was standing in the open door hatch and turned around to wave a last farewell to the crowd, a jubilant shout went up into the clear warm air of the planet. It was like the cry of relief from a creature which, after long suffering, had suddenly been delivered from its torture.

Rhodan felt the tears well up in his eyes. Abruptly he turned and disappeared in the interior of the little spaceship. Seconds later came an almost imperceptible shock as the craft started and shot steeply up into the sky.

Barkon fell away beneath the ship into the eternal silence of loneliness.

For two days the same series of events that had brought him to Barkon II repeated themselves in reverse. The galaxy became bigger and bigger with every hour, until finally the little ship plunged into the star swarms of the spiral nebula. Rhodan felt like the prodigal son: he had come home. And suddenly he could truly experience himself what the Barkonides had meant when they were speaking of their unbearable loneliness.

"In one hour well reach our destination," said the Immortal in a clearly audible voice. "Perhaps you'll tell me now why you came to visit me."

"Don't you know?" Rhodan said in surprise.

"I want you to tell me in your own words."

"I need the ultimate weapon to remove the threat to my home planet. The galactic traders have discovered Earth--and they won't be the last to do so."

"The children of the Barkonides," It laughed sarcastically, and abruptly became very serious. "They must not be disappointed when they eventually reach the galaxy--and that might come about sooner than you think. Maybe somebody will help them to conquer time." It paused for awhile to let the full effect of It's words properly sink in. "One strong arm will have to unite this galaxy. And you, Rhodan, have the needed strength. You alone! Therefore I'll give you the weapon you want. Only--don't misuse it, never!"

"You'll give it to me?" Rhodan tried to reassure himself; he felt all of a sudden the old mistrust toward the Immortal. "Without tasks to be solved, without further trials and tests?"

"Our flight through infinity was the best test. You have passed it, haven't you?"

"I think so--with your help."

"Of course with my help, how else could you have done it? And so you want to have a fictive tele-transmitter. You want to teleport matter--probably some atomic bombs--into the ships of your enemies."

"Will you help me?"

"Naturally. But now, Perry, go to sleep. You have another jump into time ahead of you. You don't want to miss returning into the present where your task is awaiting you. Your friend Bell will be wondering where you have been in this second..."

And while Rhodan was thinking about the Immortal's words, he felt an irresistible fatigue sweep over him. He gazed at the screen and recognized the first constellation. It shifted slightly.

Then he fell asleep...

...to awake immediately.

5/ The Most Dangerous Monster in the Universe

"...the matter? You are becoming transparent and... there you are again! Are you messing around with teleportation?"

Rhodan's glance fell on the clock in front of him on the instrument panel. He hadn't lost even one full second!

"Hello, Reg," he said with a strangely shaky voice. "Teleportation? No, not quite. Maybe just one of the jokes of our immortal friend." He looked out through the window hatch. "Ah, the mountains. We'll soon be there."

Bell was just about to ask something more but then decided against it. A deep vertical furrow appeared on his forehead just above the root of his nose. Maybe he was trying to figure out how Rhodan had managed to obtain a freshly laundered shirt in this fraction of a second. Also his uniform looked freshly ironed. But wasn't anything possible on this Planet of Eternal Life-even the impossible?

The city came into view. The landing field seemed to have become larger. New buildings rose at the perimeter. The big hall was still standing as before. The entrance was open. A forlorn human figure stood below at the edge of the field and looked up at them.

Homunk-the artificial creation of the Immortal. It represented him, the great invisible being, and was the middleman between It and the Earthlings. With It's unfathomable knowledge It had created a man out of matter-and there were no more unanswered questions for this creature.

The Stardust touched down.

Rhodan and Bell were the first to leave the spaceship. They walked over to Homunk, who waited for them with a smile.

"Welcome on Wanderer, the eternal planet," he said and shook hands with the two new arrivals. "So this time it's a weapon you want. A tele-matter transmitter, so my master has informed me. Your wish is granted. I received orders to install two such machines in the battle stations of your spaceship. You'll help me with this task."

Rhodan was astonished how fast the Immortal was acceding to his request. This did not fit at all the image It had created formerly in his visitors' minds-if Rhodan overlooked the 10 weeks he had just spent together with It.

"Of course we'll help with the installation." Rhodan had to repress an irresistible urge to give Homunk a friendly slap on the back and to call him simply "old friend." The artificial man was smiling. "Shall we begin?"

No further ado, no delay.

Why should the Immortal be interested in not losing any time-after all, wasn't It Time's master?

For a moment Rhodan had forgotten that It possessed a very peculiar sense of humour.

The work started at once. Fifty Arkonide robots stationed aboard the Stardust started installing both transmitters under the direction and supervision of Homunk.

Two weeks went by.

Rhodan grew steadily more worried that this project was taking up too much time. Also, Bell could not conceal his apprehensions. At the beginning of the third week, while the work was still proceeding, Bell had a private talk with Rhodan. The two friends were standing on a small hill and looked over in direction of the imitation Alps. To their left they could see the shining surface of an ocean. The artificial sun was straight overhead. It was pleasantly warm on this artificial world.

"Have you discussed this matter with It?" inquired Bell.

"You mean our being pressed for time?" Rhodan countered, though he knew exactly what Bell was referring to. "I've made several attempts but have never been able to get a straightforward reply. Judging by our previous experiences it's quite possible that only a few weeks will go by here in outer space while on Earth several years may have elapsed. This would be a catastrophe. What good would these super weapons do us if we'd arrive too late-too late to save the Earth and the universe?"

"We ought to..." began Bell, but stopped short. Rhodan noticed his hesitation and suddenly he knew what had silenced Bell: he was looking out over the ocean from whence a colourful sphere came sailing across the gentle dunes. It was drifting toward them as if borne by the wind. Then a familiar voice sounded forth from it, unmistakably that of the Immortal, loud and clear, mingled with the usual overtones of derision.

"I've assumed a very impressive shape, don't you agree? I could also have appeared in the form of a monster but that would be too unaesthetic. The multicoloured soap bubble looks so much more beautiful."

"Couldn't it also burst?" Bell asked without respect.

"Why sure!" came the Immortal's explosive laughter. It sounded hilarious. "Would you like to watch me do it?"

Rhodan was in no mood for fun and games now. He didn't want to waste the opportunity to carry out the mission he had come here for in the first place. He shouted: "Don't! I've come to ask you a favour."

"Another one?"

"Yes, another favour, old friend. You know my situation. Our opponents have seized the advantage over us, have placed our system under siege. They've lured my friends into a trap and will wipe them out unless I return in time to save them. Your world is situated on another time plane than ours. When I visited you here for the first time more than four weeks had gone by on Earth in the meantime. This mustn't happen again. Even two weeks would be fatal. I'd like to ask you..."

"Would 10 minutes be enough?" inquired the Immortal. The colourful sphere seemed to puff up and more and more colours glistened on its surface. Rhodan, quite perplexed nodded his head in agreement. "Yes, 10 minutes."

"Alright. And just think what you have experienced during this time. You have made a flight through infinity, witnessed the fate of a race-and you have been able to equip your ship with a marvellous new weapon. By the way, I have many other and even better weapons here but you didn't ask for them. And I am not in a position to give them to you unless you specifically ask for them. Perhaps later..."

"Homunk threw out a few hints yesterday," Bell remembered and grew quite excited. "But he wouldn't answer any questions."

"He hasn't been authorized to do so," responded the sphere which now was hovering directly overhead. "But the few clues should suffice to set you thinking. Maybe on your next visit you'll be able to supply more precise data as to what you would like to have from me. I'll be glad to help you then. You wouldn't want the Barkonides to be disappointed when they return home."

Bell looked puzzled. "The Barkonides? Don't you mean the Arkonides?"

A gigantic laugh reverberated from the skies. But before Bell could say anything he was almost thrown to the ground by a violent blast of wind. The brightly opalescent bubble had indeed burst! Air rushed from all sides to fill the vacuum, then calm reigned again.

"I can't see why my question should have been so hilarious," mumbled Bell and pulled Rhodan down the hill with him. "Who are these Barkonides?"

"That's a long story," Rhodan replied softly. Then after a slight pause he added: "Maybe it's just a legend-I don't really know. I'll tell it to you sometime. Thank Heavens we're rid of our main worries now. We won't miss any time."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure!" And Rhodan started to walk briskly away. Down below on the wide field stood the wafting Stardust. Tomorrow the new weapon would be ready to be put into action.

* * * *

Homunk had come into the, command centre. "I am to tell you, Rhodan, that you can start now."

"Won't we have a chance to say goodbye to It?" Rhodan was genuinely surprised.

"It is doing so through me-besides, It is here with us now, this very second."

Bell looked around the room but could see nothing. "Where is It?" he wanted to know. Apparently he had expected another brightly shimmering sphere to appear inside the command centre.

Homunk smiled. "In the form of a human being-somebody you are most fond of, Reg," the artificial man gave him a hint. Then he became serious again. My master wants you to depart in 10 minutes. Push through the energy bell in a vertical direction. You'll return the same day you originally left."

Once again Rhodan experienced a sense of relief on hearing the renewed confirmation. "And the weapon? How will it work?"

"Find out for yourself," suggested Homunk.

Rhodan switched on the intercom and sent through some orders to the weapons centre. Then he consulted his watch. "I hope my old friend won't mind if I try it out here inside his own domain." And with another glance at his watch, "How deep is this ocean?"

Homunk replied at once as if he had expected the question: "12,000 feet."

"Excellent!" Again Rhodan spoke with his weapons centre. He relayed some data. Then the order: "Ready? I'm releasing it!"

He depressed a lever. Some seconds passed. Then far out in the ocean a huge water mountain arose, piled up into a gigantic cone, then collapsed again. White vapours ascended in whirling clouds into the artificial sky. Then a tidal wave swept toward the shore, flooding a large part of the coast.

At the same time it began to rain.

Somewhere somebody was laughing. "Well done, old friend. You know how to handle my weapons. But I'm warning you once more: your superiority must serve exclusively for the preservation of peace-otherwise the weapon will be turned against you. Only if you are being attacked may you annihilate your opponent. But never, never must you be the first to attack! I'm warning you, old friend. I'm deadly serious on this point."

"Your concern is unfounded," Rhodan reassured It. "Our superior arms will be used only to realize the dream of the Barkonides-we are agreed on that, aren't we?"

"Completely! And now farewell, Perry Rhodan. But, just a moment, before I forget-I promised Bell a little present. He'll find it in his cabin."

Once more the laughter of the invisible Immortal, then all was quiet in the room.

Homunk walked over to the door. "All my best wishes accompany you. And let me give you some advice: as soon as you leave the protective hull of this world and reenter the normal plane of existence-watch out! Goodbye, my friends!"

He had vanished before they could answer.

Bell had fixed his gaze on an empty spot in the air in front of him. "In my cabin? What has It promised to give me, I wonder?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "It seems like an eternity since we first came here. I can't remember everything."

"You're right, two and a half weeks is a long time."

Rhodan smiled in amusement. So Bell had lived for 17 days in the meantime. And how about himself? 131/2 weeks? Or an eternity-twice 150,000 years?

Or only 10 minutes!

He raised his hand and activated the intercom. "Attention, crew! We're starting in one minute! Get ready! Safety precautions effective! We'll pass through the energy bell in exactly three minutes! Countdown!"

The robot counter took over.

The Stardust lifted off and rose slowly and majestically into the unnaturally blue sky. The clouds of the underwater atomic detonation had already settled out. High above, the artificial sun lavished its golden rays.

"I'm going to my cabin to stretch out on my bed," announced Bell. "Let me know when we're ready for the transjump."

Rhodan nodded briefly. He remained all alone now in the centre. The pilot's chair would provide sufficient protection to withstand even the strongest shock unharmed. From here he could steer the giant sphere with one hand, unless he preferred to switch over the controls to the automatic guidance system.

Precisely two minutes after its launching the Stardust thrust through the energy bell that enveloped the artificial planet Wanderer. The shock raced through all the rooms of the Stardust but was largely compensated for by the gravitational fields.

Seconds before this penetration was to take place, a small signal light began to glow. It was Bell, trying to call the command centre via the intercom. Rhodan felt annoyed and didn't answer. He had no time to spare now to listen to some silly joke. The situation demanded his undivided attention and besides his thoughts were occupied with Homunk's warning to be especially on guard right after the break-through.

Although Rhodan could not imagine why the prophesied time leap should represent a danger, he was not about to ignore the warning.

He looked at the clock on the panel which now, seconds before the break-through, showed Terra time still unchanged.

Then came the concussion. Instantly the planet Wanderer disappeared to make room for the familiar view of outer space.

The numbers on the digital clock in front of Rhodan's eyes were racing madly. The shipboard calendar adjusted itself to the new time plane.

Exactly ten and a half minutes earlier they had first penetrated here at the same spot into the energy bell of the planet Wanderer. Seven hours ago they had started out from Earth.

In 40 minutes the Immortal would take him along-to a flight into the depths of the abyss between the spiral nebulae. To a flight through infinity...

Rhodan felt his hair stand on end-and the same second the general alarm system shrilled through the Stardust.

The location instruments had discovered matter although there was not supposed to be any matter within a radius of 50 light-years!

Seconds later there came a report from the weapons centre: "All set to fire. Tele-transmitter ready for action!"

Before the hatches closed, Rhodan saw the eight barrel-shaped ships of the Springers resolutely pouncing on the Stardust although they must have been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance of the spacesphere.

Seconds later the electronic impulses were racing through the automated installations.

Simultaneously, Rhodan heard a resounding laughter in his ears and somebody was shouting gaily: "Hello, old friend! Now you can really try out your new weapon-it's the greatest fun of all times and places in the universe..."

Rhodan didn't share It's opinion. His eyes narrowed and he bit down on his lower lip. He shouted into the microphone: "Transmitter one-action!"

At that instant the Stardust became the deadliest and most dangerous monster in the universe.

6/ Time Stands Still

Tophthor couldn't believe his eyes.

Just a few minutes earlier he had issued a command for a short rest period for his crew as lie had counted on the likelihood that Rhodan would remain longer on the seemingly invisible planet. As soon as the giant sphere reappeared he planned to strike a lightning blow against the enemy ship and destroy it. Afterwards it shouldn't be too difficult to find the Planet of Eternal Life.

And now the Stardust suddenly materialized out of the void, right in front of his nose, barely 10 minutes after it had vanished.

At once he was wide awake. His mighty hand hit down hard on the lever which established visual communication with the other ships of his fleet.

"Alarm! Rhodan is back again! Attack and destroy! I'll quickly calculate the co-ordinates of his point of reappearance."

Grogham was at his post. With a few terse words he gave the order to attack. He sent forward five of his ships while his vessel and Tophthor's kept their present positions. This manoeuvre saved both their lives.

The five ships drew wide apart until they finally formed a ring in whose centre the Stardust stood waiting without making any attempt at defence.

"Torpedoes!" roared Grogham. The commanding officers of the five battleships, who so often had rushed to the aid of other trader clans, received the broadcast command. They went into action. Five heavy fighter torpedoes with fusion bombs left the fire hatches and sped with increasing speed toward the Stardust.

Tense with expectation, Tophthor and Grogham watched for further developments. They counted of course on the appearance of a powerful defence screen of the Terranian but both hoped secretly that it would not be able to withstand the assault of five super-heavy atom bombs.

Five blinding explosions flared up almost simultaneously around the Stardust. Dazzled, Tophthor closed his eyes to wait until the first blaze died down; he could not help feeling a certain pride. Hopefully he had now succeeded in accomplishing what Etztak and Organs had tried in vain-to annihilate Rhodan. But this was not the only pay-off he would receive for all his troubles. He had also found the legendary World of Eternal Life-or at least almost.

He opened his eyes slowly.

He saw the undamaged giant spacesphere floating majestically inside the surrounding circle of the five barrel-shaped battleships of Tophthor's clan of the Mounders.

Beside himself with rage he thundered: "Two torpedoes this time! Each ship two torpedoes simultaneously!"

Grogham again led the attack. Part of his confidence was gone and he suffered from a gnawing uncertainty, that this time they had found not only their match but, worse still, their master.

And again this time Rhodan's protective screen withstood the 10 detonations and the impact of the energy discharges. It meant straining the generators to the breaking point, however. If the traders should triple their initial onslaught the Stardust would be lost.

"Transmitter one-ready for action!"

"Ready!" The confirmation was stated in calm and matter of fact tones. The armament centre was waiting. The men had full confidence in the new weapon-and especially in Rhodan.

Thank heavens they didn't continue their attack with the torpedoes any longer, Rhodan noted with relief. Now they were trying it with concentrated heat ray beams. A formidable weapon but not powerful enough to overtax the defensive powers of the Stardust's energy screen.

Now it was Rhodan's first chance to devote his attention to Bell, who meanwhile had come storming into the command centre, his red hair standing on edge.

"Had a good rest?" inquired Rhodan gently.

"What do you mean by that remark?" Bell seemed as mad as a hatter and without any good reason, it seemed to Rhodan. Bell raged on. "While you have your fun here with those fat Springer sausages, I have to..."

"What did you call those ships?" Rhodan thought he had not understood his friend correctly.

"Fat sausages, you heard me right the first time-they belong to the Springers, don't they? So-I'll call them any name I please!"

"What's the matter with you, Reggie, why are you so irritated? Something rubbed you the wrong way...?"

"Did it ever!" burst out Bell but he still managed to observe with great interest how the hostile heat-rays glanced off their own energy screen without harming the Stardust. "That Immortal! If I ever meet that thing again, I'll... hum, it's actually also just as much my fault."

Rhodan, worriedly, shook his head. "I'm afraid the latest time-jump didn't agree with you, although you must have slept right through it. Or did someone bump you on the head?"

"Nobody bumped me on the head or anywhere else!" yelled Bell furiously and stomped his foot. His red hair bristles were trembling with excitement. "That Immortal..."

"What's the matter with me?" said a voice from the ceiling. Rhodan and Bell looked up and grew numb. Close above their heads hovered a fist-sized sphere, opalescing in all colours of the rainbow and sending forth a whitish glow. "And I meant to do you a favour, Reggie. You are an ingrate! By the way, Rhodan, don't waste your precious time with his temper tantrums. Your opponents are planning an attack with the gravitation bomb. This will hurl your ship Stardust into the fifth dimension..."

Gravitation bomb! The most hideous of all weapons thus far known! He himself had never dared deploy it. And now he faced the threat of being annihilated by such a bomb.

"Weapons center-transmitter one-fire!"

The co-ordinates were correct to the nth degree. One of the ships suddenly puffed up as though an atom bomb were exploding inside it-which actually was the case. A sun sprang into existence. After it ceased glowing and the luminous cloud spread in all directions, no trace whatsoever could be detected of the ship.

Without any difficulty the tele-transmitter had transported the bomb through the enemy's protective screen and had then exploded it in the ship's interior.

There was no defence against such a weapon.

Rhodan swept away all his moral scruples. He realized it was a question of self-survival. No sense fooling around with these Springers. He didn't even know that he was dealing here with another clan.

"Transmitter two-fire!"

The second ship was just as promptly wiped out as the first.

"Horrible!" groaned Bell. "What an awesome weapon we have acquired..."

Rhodan clenched his teeth and resolutely spoke into the microphone: "Transmitter one-fire!"

Then. "Transmitter two-fire!"

The last of the attacking ships now decided to proceed with an act of desperation. Like a Kamikaze-ship it accelerated its speed and raced toward the Stardust. In the nick of time, just before the two ships would have collided, Rhodan managed to annihilate the suicide-bent ship.

The fiery glow of the explosion grazed the Stardust's energy screen.

Wide-eyed, Topthor had followed the events. He began to realize that something incredible had just happened. Rhodan must have succeeded inside hardly 10 minutes to obtain some sinister weapon on the Planet of Eternal Life. Although this seemed most improbable it had to be the truth. How else could the five ships have been wiped out within barely two minutes? This could not have been accomplished with conventional weapons-not even by Rhodan.

But Topthor also realized something else: Rhodan did not intend to attack or annihilate anybody unless he was first assaulted. Therefore the last three ships remaining of his fleet of eight vessels were safe.

"Grogham, get ready for the transition! Destination doesn't matter! Two hundred light-years. We'll get our bearings again from there! In two minutes! I'll radio the message to Etztak in the meantime."

And now Rhodan made a tiny mistake.

He no longer paid any attention to the three remaining enemy battleships but switched the Stardust over to acceleration and raced with breakneck speed into space, leaving Topthor and his three barrel-shaped ships far behind.

"How about those three?" asked Bell. "Don't you want to...?"

"...destroy them too? Why? They no longer constitute a threat to us. Our foremost task now is to come to the aid of Tiff. Don't forget that he is sitting on an ice planet which might easily turn into a flaming hell if Etztak loses patience and gets to the bottom of the game we're playing with him. The transition will take place in eight minutes. We'll materialize in the system of Beta-Albireo."

At first Bell seemed to agree but he quickly changed his mind. "No, wait a minute. We can't take her along with us."

Rhodan looked at him with unbelieving eyes. "Her?... and who is she?"

"Man alive, don't you know? Rallas, of course!"

For a moment Rhodan thought his friend must have lost his mind. He frowned and regarded the man whose face had taken on a desperate expression. "Rallas! Do you mean to say...?"

"Exactly! She's sitting in my cabin, deadly insulted that I don't care for her. Good grief, if the crew should find out about that-especially that Redkens! I won't have a quiet minute left in my life."

Rhodan made certain that his navigation robot was calculating the transition point and the intensity of the leap and that they had at least seven minutes left. Then he grimed mischievously: "Calm down, it isn't the genuine Rallas!"

"What difference does that make? Everybody will believe she's the real thing-and that's what she is, after all. What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Ignore her! The way I know our old friend the Immortal, It'll let her disappear if we don't pay attention to her. But for the time being, keep her in your cabin."

"In my cabin?" Bell made such a desperate face that Rhodan had to laugh out loud. "I can't live with her in my cabin! Not that I have anything against the fair sex but under the circumstances..."

Rhodan looked at his watch. Six minutes remained. "She'll vanish during the transition, for sure. The Immortal is just playing another one of It's jokes..."

From outside in the corridor came the sound of steps, a confusion of voices. Somebody laughed.

Suddenly Bell turned pale. He threw an astonished glance at Rhodan, then, resolutely, he opened the door.

Outside in the corridor stood Stella giving autographs. Several members of the radio crew, amongst them also Redkens, were crowded around the famous film star, eagerly talking to her. Redkens, in particular, wanted to find out from her if she had spent the whole time in Bell's cabin.

That was too much for Bell.

Hissing furiously, he rushed right into the crowd of enthusiastic autograph hunters, pushed them aside with his strong fists. His hair still on edge, he faced the movie luminary squarely. She gazed at him ecstatically with innocent eyes.

"How dare you," he spat out his words, "attack my good name like that? People will think I smuggled you secretly aboard in order to..."

"In order to do what?" inquired the curious film star.

Bell masked his embarrassment with rudeness. "You know exactly for what purpose!" he roared and stepped on the toes of poor Redkens, who had come too close. "Everybody's bound to believe that!"

"But that's the way it was!" whispered the film star and blushed. "Didn't we spend such happy hours together?" Bell's complexion could have been called an anatomical miracle. Rhodan could not recall ever having seen such a deep red face. The men were so startled at this sight that they withdrew slightly, perhaps fearing he might burst at any moment.

"We did...?" stammered Bell, then couldn't find any more words. His self-control finally came to an end. Foaming with rage, he pulled himself up to his full height, his hands shot out, grabbing the Hollywood beauty firmly around the neck. "I'll kill you! You're totally sabotaging the morale of our crew..."

Then, dumbfounded, he fell silent. His eyes wide open, he stared at his own face, which suddenly grinned at him familiarly. Cries of astonishment could be heard. Someone in the background was shrieking in horror.

Bell was just about to strangle his exact doppelganger. The divine Rallas had vanished and another Reginald Bell had taken her place! Two Bells were confronting each other! The genuine one beet-red with fury and ready to kill the other one. The false Bell sported a nonchalant grin, one of his characteristic, customary expressions.

Rhodan could hardly refrain from laughing. There were just three minutes left before the transition. "I hope you understand now that the Immortal has been playing a trick on you-and all the others have witnessed it here. Your good name has been cleared, Reg. And let go of your doppelganger, he's not the one to be blamed."

Bell released his grip around his victim's neck and stepped back. Slowly his complexion returned to normal. "How is it possible?" he asked, his voice tinged with awe at the inexplicable. He pointed to his double. "This-that's me, how can that be? Or isn't that myself?"

"Just an imitation, the same as the divine Rallas or our good friend Homunk. It could also have been me. But enough now, let's forget It's pranks, there are more important matters to attend to. Bell, help me here to check over the transition data. Everybody else, return to your stations! Yes, you, too, Redkens! Keep that autograph, you can bet anything it's genuine."

The cadet kept looking back and forth from his signed photo of his film idol to the broad, grinning face of the false Bell. Redkens was unable to regard that face with the same admiration and love as that of the beautiful movie star. His disappointment was so obvious that Bell turned toward him shouting furiously: "Get lost, Redkens! After all, you can't expect me to be as pretty as your Rallas!"

A very downcast Redkens slowly joined the radio crew as they left the command centre.

The pseudo-Bell, however, changed now into a white luminous sphere which, giggling derisively, disappeared into the wall panels.

"Good riddance!" was Bell's comment as he slammed the door. 'I'd like to be several hundred light-years away from here already."

"How come you've become so touchy? Can't you take an innocent little joke anymore?" Rhodan asked. "After all, you asked for it; you practically challenged the Immortal, don't you know?"

Bell checked the instruments. "Sixty seconds left. Co-ordinates OK. Everything alright!" He threw himself down into a chair and leaned back. He closed his eyes and continued: "In two minutes we'll be more than 1750 light-years away from here."

He was silent-and Rhodan was grateful for that.

Now, just this very second, he had started on the journey together with the Immortal. He could feel a wave of non-comprehension sweep over him, engulfing him completely. For a moment it seemed as if he were falling into a never-ending abyss. He was plunging downwards unchecked. His eyes were wide open but they saw nothing-only coal black darkness with a tiny, washed-out spot of light, way ahead.

The Milky Way!

He was hurtling straight toward it-with unimaginable speed.

But this lasted but one second, then the vision disappeared, making way for reality. Once again he saw before him the control panels of the Stardust, the instruments, dials and the many levers and needles and buttons.

He was reclining in his pilot's chair and felt the vibrations of the power drive. That was incontestable reality. Yet the past second-what had that actually been? Rhodan was horrified when he realized that he had twice experienced that second. No, three times!

Once above the planet Wanderer, the incomprehensible structure of an even more incomprehensible being.

Then in infinity, where this second became two things: a reality of 10 weeks and a vision of 300,000 years.

And now, once more in a perfectly normal second!

But which second was the true one, the real one? What actually was a second if it no

longer had validity?

"Thirty seconds!" said the robot counter with its metallic voice. "Twenty-nine..."

Rhodan closed his eyes.

Twenty-nine seconds or 29 eternities, as you like it!" How much time do we miss, actually, by dividing it in time units?

And, as he had half-way expected, the answer came from the void, a familiar and well-known voice, soundless and yet so clearly audible:

A very clever question. Just imagine there were neither day nor night, no seasons nor tides on Earth. Would man be aware of growing older? Wouldn't he be very surprised if suddenly he would feel death approach? Would he even know that time does exist?

"But-is time not something quite real, just like space?"

Both are absolutely unreal, Perry. Ahead a distance of more than 1750 light-years now lies, an almost unimaginable distance which was considered insurmountable in your world hardly 10 years ago. You will cover this distance in a single second. Your watch will show that indeed only one second has passed when you reach your destination. Disregard time and you will realize that the conquest of space in this form is impossible. And despite this, it does happen! Do you have an answer for this?

"Hyperspace, paraspaces. We are travelling through the fifth dimension..."

Words, nothing but words. Man will say these words without comprehending what they actually mean. Even for your well-trained mind they must remain incomprehensible. The human brain shows a predilection to coin abstract concepts. I would like to transmit to you a concept of true reality but I begin to see that I would confuse you all the more with it. But there is a lot of time left before you leave me.

Not much longer, thought Rhodan and consulted his watch. Unchanged it still read 29 seconds. Next to him, Bell was lying in his chair, unmoving. His face was rigid, like dead.

All the time in the world in this state, thought back the Immortal. Look at your watch, it has stopped! Listen to the robot-counter, you can't hear it any more because for it too time has stopped. Or your friend Reg-from your point of view he is dead.

"DEAD?"

Yes, dead. For as long as you might observe him, only a fraction of a second will be passing for him. The blood has stopped in his veins. The Stardust remains in the same spot. Time does not pass-except for you.

Rhodan was struck with horror. A cold wind, as if coming from a grave, seemed to penetrate the command centre. He shuddered. He threw a glance at his watch. The second hand was not moving.

Rhodan fought against the panic that swept over him as best he could but he was unable to prevent it overwhelming him-at least partially. He nudged Bell with his elbow.

Bell's body was like a stone. He didn't budge a millimetre from the spot.

"Reg, do you hear me?"

It's senseless! said the Immortal's voice from the void. As seen from your point of view, Bell is frozen in time. He can see you seated next to him but he can't perceive your lightning-fast movements, neither can he hear the words you speak. Consider that as far as he is concerned not even a fraction of a second is passing while we are endeavouring to solve the problem of time-and we may be remaining for hours in this plane of timelessness.

"And I? What's happening to me? What if I should get up now and wander all over the Stardust?"

Nobody is holding you back. You'll leave your seat-but in reality you'll have left it only for a thousandth of a second. Your movements are too fast; they can't be registered by human eyes.

Rhodan didn't get out of his seat. "I can't understand it-my mind simply refuses to recognize this as reality. I can't simultaneously exist in two different time planes."

Of course you can. While you are sitting in front of a television set you are also existing twice at the same time-providing a film is shown on which you are to be seen.

"But that's altogether different!" protested Rhodan.

Is that really so? If one considers that they are changing from second to second, practically becoming another person? The cells of bodies constantly renew themselves, the same as our blood. Consequently the person of this moment cannot be identical with that of a moment later. They are two different human beings. But bring them together in the same second-and that's possible if you have mastered time-two similar but not identical people will be facing each other.

"You mean to say Bell was trying to strangle himself and not his mirage?"

The Immortal was chuckling to himself. He almost killed that Reginald Bell who was going to exist in 10 minutes' time. That's where I fetched him from.

Rhodan asked: "And if he would have killed him, what would have happened then?"

The Immortal ignored his question. Apparently It was not willing to answer all inquiries. We had been discussing the possibility of influencing the future. You have seen the proof. In your own interest I'm going to supply you with another proof. But don't believe that I want to undo something that is taking place this very moment. I only want you to have been forewarned. Accompany me into Topthor's spaceship.

"Who is Topthor?"

The leader of the Trader clan who attacked you. A Mounder. Don't be frightened when you see him. He is just about to execute a transition together with his three remaining ships. This very moment he is issuing an order to his radio officer to broadcast a message to Etztak.

"Etztak-the patriarch of the Springers! What is it all about?"

You know as well as I do that Etztak has lost patience. He plans to transform the planet on which your friends are hiding out into an atomic hell. As soon as he receives this radio message he'll no longer hesitate to carry out his plan. Besides, you know, he was only waiting that long because he was still hoping to obtain important information from your people. But once he gets Topthor's message he'll realize that you were fooling him. For then it will become clear to him that your men on the ice planet were merely engaging in diversionary tactics, leaving you free to fly undisturbed to the Planet of Eternal Life in order to secure the new weapon. Topthor will inform him that you now have obtained this new weapon and probably will proceed to another attack. Thus Etztak has been warned. The Traders stick to one another when their common interests are at stake. They are not of the type who foul their own nests. Etztak will summon the fighting fleets of the galactic traders to come to his assistance.

"I don't want war," groaned Rhodan. "Not even when I possess superior weapons."

To a certain degree this can't be helped, came back the Immortal's voice. And besides I'm not permitted to mix into the existing conflicts of the galaxy; this would constitute a transgression against the laws of nature. But I may give hints. And if you have been warned then this is nothing but a clue I gave you. He laughed softly and with irony. Come with me, Rhodan. I want you to meet Topthor, your future opponent. I want you to know that he won't be able to see you and neither can there be any physical contact between you two. Your body will stay here seated in the command centre of your ship while your mind will leave-for a fraction of a second."

Before Rhodan had a chance to reply something strange happened. He began to move away from himself. He seemed to float below the ceiling looking down at his own self. At the same time, his body fell back into the normal time plane, while only his mind stayed in that plane where time was standing still. The 'Rhodan' he was gazing at 'froze.' His glance was rigidly and unmovingly fixed on the instrument panel.

And then Rhodan, or rather his mind, penetrated the hull of the Stardust. He was floating free in space. In vain he tried to see himself. He was nothing. He was invisible.

The Stardust became an unmoving sphere which did not advance even an inch. The ship and all the hands in it as well as the machines turned into a realistic photo, which also represents merely one-thousandth of a second of a life.

And then the Stardust kept shrinking in size until Rhodan no longer could see it.

Maybe now you can divine why my race decided to give up their bodies when they had the opportunity to become etherealized. The body is only a means of expediency, that's all. It is vulnerable and therefore mortal.

"I wouldn't want to do without it, I'd miss it too much," Rhodan thought back.

You are only one human being but I am my entire race. That's a tremendous difference. Within me those also continue to live on who had resisted this spiritualization. This might perhaps account for my predilection to materialize in various shapes. But here we are. This is Topthor's ship.

It was also standing still. It existed in the same time plane as the Stardust. It has hard for Rhodan to imagine that nothing was happening in the meantime but this much he understood already: however long he might stay here in this condition there was no possibility of missing anything.

When he saw the nearly square-shaped giant Topthor, he grew apprehensive although he had been forewarned by the Immortal. The Mounder was just as wide as tall and broad. In his outsized hands he was holding a piece of paper which he was just handing to another Mounder who was in no way outstripped by him in size or weight.

That's the message, Rhodan. Read it.

Rhodan moved closer to the two Mounders; he could have touched them if he had had hands. The thought crossed his mind: how was it possible for him to see without eyes?

And he could plainly see the note and the writing on it:

"To Etztak, patriarch of the Etztak clan. Perry Rhodan, the Terranian, has succeeded in obtaining a new weapon. With it he destroyed five of my ships. Resistance is impossible. I'm warning you, Etztak! Be assured of our help! Rhodan will attack and wipe you out. Only a surprise attack can render him harmless. I'll send word of my new position and am expecting your offer. Topthor
Clan of the Mounders"

Rhodan perused the message twice and was sure he would not forget its text. All depended now on how quickly Etztak would react to this warning and offer. Probably not fast enough. The Stardust could reach the Beta-Albireo system with a single jump-of course Topthor was capable of the same thing too. But before the Mounder would intervene in the battle, days might go by. Etztak was a tough bird and was bound to haggle over the price to be paid.

That was Rhodan's only chance.

He receded a bit and had a closer look at Topthor. His face was certainly human or Arkonide. Or-Rhodan thought startled-Barkonide. Somewhat changed, but still. They probably had constantly lived on a planet with extremely high gravity and had undergone physical changes to adjust to their environment.

The community of the galaxy! Rhodan smiled bitterly. How fortunate that the Barkonides did not know what had become of their realm. And until the day when the Barkonides would end their long journey through the darkness of empty space, finally to reach the edge of the Milky Way, much time would still pass. A great deal might be changed by then...

Let us return, admonished the Immortal's voice. You have seen the message your adversary will receive. Act accordingly. When you return into the plane of existence of the Stardust, not much time will be left for you. But you'll make it.

The disembodied trip through space lasted only a few seconds as far as Rhodan was concerned, then he saw the familiar shape of the Stardust come into view. Effortlessly he penetrated through the energy screen and the ship's hull to find himself unchanged and still motionless, sitting next to Bell inside the command centre.

"Thank you, old friend. When will we meet again?"

Soundless laughter filled his brain. The little word 'when' does not exist in an immortal's vocabulary, Rhodan. But rest assured, we will see each other again. Till then, farewell-and guard your heritage.

Rhodan could feel something leaving him and simultaneously he was once more in his body.

He opened his eyes. The robot counter was just saying:

"...twenty-eight..."

Well, he must have closed his eyes for one second then-and how much had happened meanwhile? A lot, a great deal! He had learned that this very instant a certain Topthor would send a message to Etztak through hyperspace. He knew the text of that message. And he began to imagine how many events happen which people unsuspectingly call "fate."

"...twenty..."

That had lasted eight seconds!

Eight eternities!

"...eighteen..."

Never before had Rhodan been thinking so much prior to a transition as today. And never had the time seemed so long. And never had Bell kept so silent.

"Cheer up!" Rhodan tried to encourage his friend. "Within a few seconds we'll probably materialize among Etztak's ships. They'll fall on us and attack us like ravenous wolves to escape destruction by our new weapon. We must be prepared and..."

"New weapon?" growled Bell, irritated. "You're not being logical, Perry. How should Etztak know that we have a new weapon?"

Perry smiled sheepishly. "You're right, Reggie. How could he have found out about our new weapon? I almost think we're getting old. Even relatively immortal people can age. You certainly show it!"

"Nine!" said the robot firmly.

"How do I show it?" Bell flared.

"Well, that gorgeous apparition. A younger man in your place certainly wouldn't have been so uptight, even if she was real and not just a convincing imitation."

"...four..."

"I didn't lose my cool over her. I was upset because of my men. Discipline aboard makes it necessary..."

"That's curd from the Milky Way and you know it!" snorted Perry.

Reg did not reply.
And then:
"Transition!"

* * * *

The Stardust disappeared from the universe and slipped into five-dimensional space. From this instant, time stood still for the ship and all its complement. Simultaneously the chronological clock of all the universe halted, for even far away on Earth only a split second passed while the Stardust executed the jump that light itself would take more than 1750 years to traverse.

Pains raced through Rhodan's body as his consciousness returned. With great effort he opened his eyes and recognized the flaming double star Beta-Albireo on the videoscreen.

In his subconscious mind was the residue of a question-a question he had been asked during the leap.

What was that question again?

And who had posed it?

Ah, yes-now he remembered: Did you understand it NOW?

It must have been the voice of the Immortal.

Did he understand it now? Rhodan shook his head and said out loud: "No, I did not understand, old friend. I'm only a human being-how could I comprehend the enormity of eternity? But I am very grateful to you that you tried to show my finite mind, that you granted me a flight through infinity which gave me an inkling at least of how a universe is created and preserved."

Neither the darkness of the room nor the flaming sun made comment.

Bell mumbled: "I see you have the same old trouble, Perry-talking crazy when we come to. That's the only drawback to these transitions-we should try to remedy it somehow.-Are we there?"

Rhodan observed the twinkling stars. "Yes," he agreed a bit absentmindedly, "we should really do something about it. Perhaps in a million years. Oh-yes, we're here."

And suddenly it seemed to him that somebody was laughing deep inside his psyche. Not sarcastically or derisively but with relief. As if someone who had been lonely for an con had finally found that It was no longer alone.